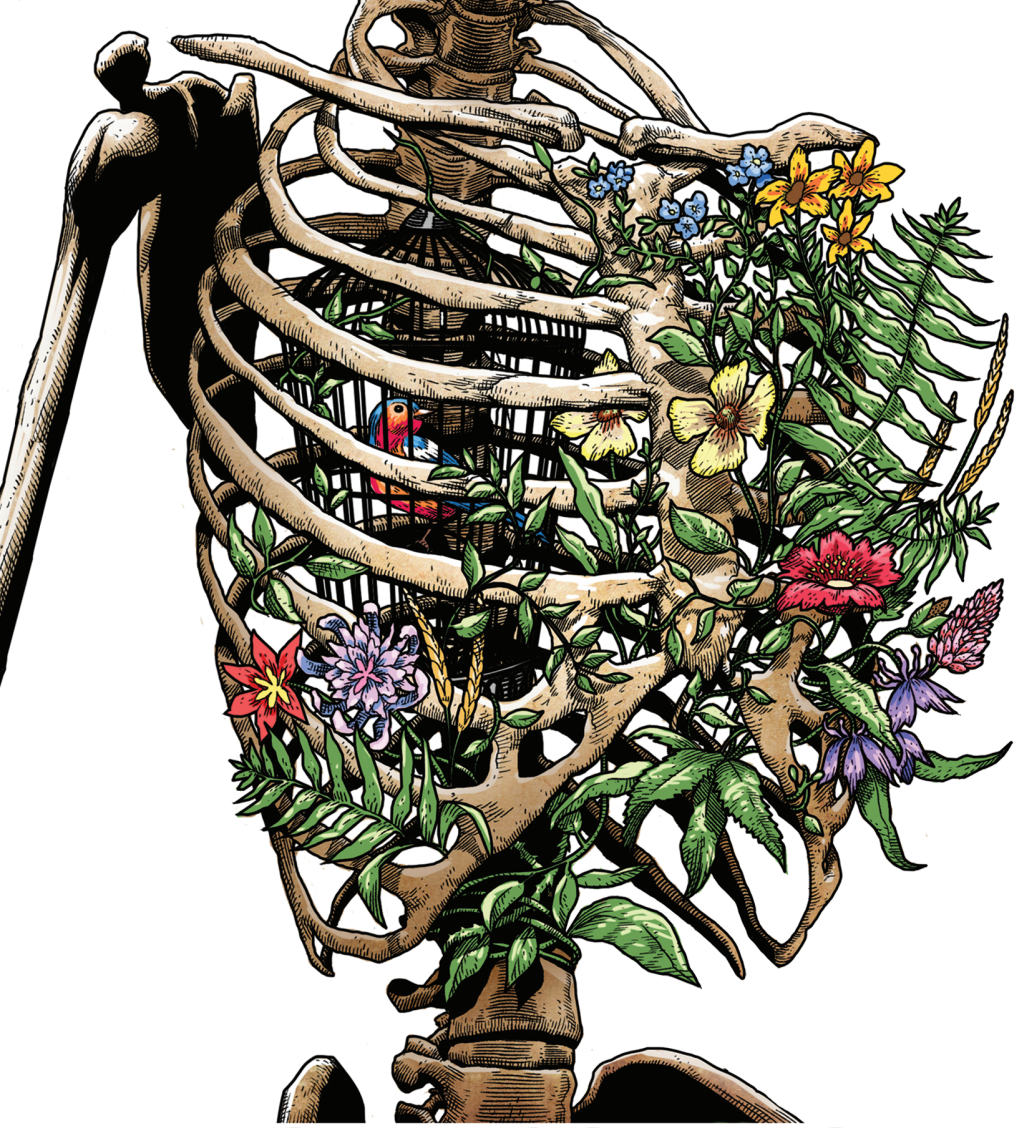

OVERCOMING BURNOUT

NICOLE ROSE

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Nicole Rose

Overcoming Burnout, Nicole Rose

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For Anna

I am sorry I was in so much pain and so messed up that I didn't love you the way you deserved. I wish I had a second chance. I hope you are in the sky with your favourite fallen revolutionaries. This book is dedicated to you.

INTRODUCTION

I never thought I would write a book about burnout because I never thought I'd burnout. I thought I had enough passion and determination to last me forever. However, after years of complex trauma, prison and repression coupled with intense workaholism, my body said no. I was hospitalised in February 2016 with acute rib pain that became chronic. I started to blog about my recovery. I wanted to explore burnout, chronic illness and trauma through an anarchist lens.

From exploring how 'patriarchy makes me tired' to discussions on class, collective organising and how state violence shapes your body. I knew when I was recovering that I didn't want to abandon struggles for liberation and so I made an effort, with others, to reflect on and to change conditions in our collectives that contributed to people burning out and that led to better collective care and mutual aid.

Since writing the blogs, hundreds of people have contacted me and I've been blown away both by the support of strangers and also the sheer prevalence of burnout, physical and mental health issues, macho and oppressive attitudes to health and the loneliness in people's struggles with these experiences.

I also want to add that there is no medical definition of burnout, I believe it is a useful term for people wanting to describe their feelings, which is different for everyone. For me, it was a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress.

This collection contains all the blog posts in sequence with little to no edits since they were published. I wanted to leave them raw and real and imperfect. My deepest gratitude to everyone who has helped make them happen.

1

CONFRONTING DENIAL

This piece has felt hard to write, because I have prided myself on never 'burning out'. I've pushed myself to exhaustion and back again, I've been hospitalised, collapsed into prison and wept in relief of the respite. But it's never been prolonged. I've been organising since I was 10 years old and somehow managed to keep my energy as I've powered through campaign after campaign, experiencing quite intense personal traumas (losing people I love, prison, repression, break-ups, friends' suicide attempts, you name it) yet somehow staying strong and focused. That's an 18 year stretch.

This winter I felt myself unable to keep up the pace. It's been like a slow rot inside of me. A fear in my subconscious creeping into my everyday thoughts. The dreaded 'burnout'. The place where people disappear from our movements and never seem to return. I had never fully empathised, to be honest; I always thought if you care about something enough it will sustain you to keep going. (I know this is problematic, I'm just being radically honest). I have enough anger and rage inside me to fight this system for my next one hundred lives.

But somehow over the last couple of months, my desires and intentions just haven't been matched by my physical ability to cope, to make decisions, to stay on task. I've blagged through by having the odd energetic day where I complete some key tasks, or produce some tangible results. The remaining days I've felt a quiet despair while I've struggled with basic things, like responding to emails, or listening to my voicemail.

It's been visible to the people that care about me. Who really do beg me to rest, to slow down, to stay in bed a bit longer or cancel whatever it is that's dominating my time. My mental health went to shit. I cried a ton. Nightmares

returned. I even hallucinated in front of some friends because I was so, completely, utterly exhausted.

I took a break at Xmas. Went to a warm country and slept for 13 hours a night for 10 days. Yet I still didn't feel like I could face the world when I returned. There was nothing but dread inside of me thinking about the endless list of next actions, and the projects and campaigns on my plate.

In January 2015 my best friend, Gilly, died. After several months of intense care relating to her broken pelvis, the pneumonia in her lungs literally took her breath away. I had no idea it was coming and the shock of it all shook me to my core. I coped the only way I knew how: to organise into oblivion. For sure it's a healthier habit perhaps than alcoholism or drug addiction. I kicked total ass, organising international camps, weeks of action, several tours and events.

> **BUT I DENIED MYSELF REST, BECAUSE REST MEANT FEELING. REST MEANT GRIEF. REST MEANT ACCEPTING THAT GILLY IS NOT HERE ANYMORE, AND THAT ANOTHER PERSON I LOVED WHO HAS LOVED ME WITH ALL THEIR HEART IS GONE. IS DEAD.**

This follows the bereavement of other close friends and my Nan who've died in recent years, and the grief I feel in losing the campaign that was the centre of my life for a decade. Stopping and feeling means missing my best friend in prison. It means beginning to process the anger, and the rage, and the fear and the pain of the injustice she experiences and I bear witness to every single day in HMP.

So I tell myself I'm not burnt out. I'm just feeling very legitimate, understandable emotions that are inevitably going to affect my abilities to function. This gives me permission to not address my workload. To not scrutinise the impact of organising against the prison industrial complex, and the emotional weight that involves carrying. I remain addicted to the archetype of the infallible Nicole Rose, who people don't seem to understand, because she seems to have unending energy. My mum calls me 'Little Miss Whirlwind'. My energy has been probably what I've been most proud of. I share tips with others about the herbs I use, the food I eat, my strategies for managing my time and promises.

Yet that energy is zapped. Like a spiral of erosion. My last speaking tour in

Europe was a physical nightmare, as I spoke at ten events while struggling with a chest infection. I've strained the muscles in my ribcage (the intercostals) - it basically hurts to breathe in and out. I've lost five days of work and two prison visits. I'm lifeless, tearful and in pain. I have no idea how I'm going to get back 'up to speed' and get through the ever growing list of tasks that I'm responsible for.

I always remember Andy Langford from Gaia University saying that the main thing about burnout is not about being burnt out, or pushing yourself hard, it's about your capacity to recover. I arrogantly used this as a way to justify my intense workload, because I always thought I'd bounce back. For the first time in my life I'm doubting my capacity, or at least I'm not trusting my innate reserves. It's time for interventions. The following blogs are going to track my journey through this process.

> **THERE IS ONE THING I AM CLEAR ABOUT, I AM NEVER EVER LEAVING THIS STRUGGLE FOR A FREER WORLD. BUT I KNOW THAT IF I'M GOING TO CONTRIBUTE TO THIS STRUGGLE, BE OF USE AND HAVE IMPACT, I HAVE TO NOT ONLY TAKE CARE OF MYSELF BUT LET OTHER PEOPLE LOVE AND SUPPORT ME.**

I have to let some things go and accept, for once, that I really can't do everything. This isn't the first time I've explored these issues; I've not burnt out in 18 years thanks to a lot of wisdom and self care. But for now, I'm admitting defeat and I'm taking the bravest step I can – disclosing what's happening and re-designing my life so I can nourish my health, regain my strength and return to kicking ass as soon as possible.

2

WHEN DID I GET SO MEAN?

Last week I posted my first blog post about burnout, admitting to the world how I'm feeling. I've been blown away by the response. Countless comrades and friends messaging and emailing me saying how much my words resonated, or how they were in tears. Just disclosing my feelings and smashing the mirror that was lying to me every morning (the mirror being myself, my own worst enemy) has made me feel lighter and one step closer to recovering.

When someone shows me kindness, like people have been this week, it really moves me. Quenches an emotional thirst as if I've been denied it for so long. It's made me reflect on how kind (or unkind) I am to others and to myself.

And it's left me asking myself, when did I get so mean? When did I start demanding such hard work, high standards and physical effort of myself and other people? When did I get so judgemental and critical of myself? Since when did I value people's worth based on their productivity or levels of commitment?

> **A BIG PART OF MY WORK IN OVERCOMING BURNOUT, I HAVE RECOGNISED, IS ADDRESSING ROOT CAUSES OF MY BEHAVIOUR. AS AN ANARCHIST THAT CONSTANTLY SEEKS TO DRAW BACK ATTENTION TO SYSTEMIC FACTORS AND ROOT CAUSES OF ISSUES.**

I know I have to try to find the source. This for me means looking at the underlying beliefs and worldviews that are driving me.

I tried listing some of my long held beliefs related to organising, or more generally work and life. I know a lot of you will cringe at how problematic these

are, but like I said, radical honesty is how I roll:

• **Struggle demands commitment and dedication.** And hard work. They wouldn't call it struggle if it was easy.

• **This isn't meant to be easy.** It's going to be hard/gruelling/challenging. If you think it's meant to be easy you may as well stop now.

• **There would be less X (animals abused, women assaulted, refugees dying etc) if people took struggle more seriously and actually got off their asses.** If everyone that lazed around watching Netflix organised, pushed themselves, fought back, got off Facebook, X number of animals would be liberated etc.

• **This isn't a game.** This is life and death. This is a war.

• **This isn't a lifestyle choice.** I'm sick of people interacting with this struggle like it's a hobby. Like they can choose which campaign to fight, or maybe fight is the wrong word, they can choose which campaign to be associated with and most likely do jack shit and use their involvement to score social points, get laid or whatever. And it's mostly middle class people that interact with struggle like this. You're never going to actually surrender any privilege for this struggle.

• **Careerists can get in the sea.** I think it's disgusting how you use this struggle for professional gain.

• **Why aren't people more angry?** Why don't people want to fight harder? I don't understand the desire to take drugs/party/laze about etc.

• **People don't know the meaning of hard work.** People prioritise their creature comforts, their looks, their lifestyle over eradicating domination. People don't want to surrender their privilege or risk anything to actually work towards liberation.

• **People use low self esteem/mental health issue X as an excuse to not push themselves/take risks/organise.** Literally just sort your shit out and get on with it. Everyone has bad mental health in capitalism. Jesus you should have experienced some of this shit I've gone through or my best friends in prison that have been to hell and back in their lives that you can't even comprehend. They don't moan or complain, they fight to survive and resist with all they have.

• **Prison is just part of struggle.** People going to prison is inevitable. People need to accept this and just get on with it.

• **Do people really think we're gonna bring down such an oppressive, violent system without hard work?** Like this shit is going to

magically change overnight without any effort, struggle, sacrifice on our part? Like we'll just challenge the state and capitalism while still having nice picnics and watching shit on the internet in the evening?

• **Being effective, achieving things, takes grit**. Takes hard work and perseverance. People that drop out/whine/moan are weak and pathetic.

• **Pushing yourself does mean missing out on certain things.** It may mean risking your emotional or physical health. But it's a necessary part of struggle.

• **What I experience is nothing** compared to the animals/ refugees/black folk getting shot by police etc.

So there you have it. Grim, ain't it?

Writing these and reading these, yes I do cringe, I do feel shame. I can totally recognise that they are all problematic in multiple ways. Yet I feel them. And they taint my interactions with people. My comrade that cancels on me for a fundraiser because of period pains (default thoughts – half the people on the planet get period pains. Just take a painkiller/herbs and suck it up. You blatantly didn't want to come and cook for 50 people anyhow, and just cancelled last minute and used your period pains as an excuse. Slower compassionate thoughts – aww mate I'm so sorry I totally understand. Rest up and get a hot water bottle!).

And then there are some of the above beliefs, that I still, well, agree with. I do hate it when people interact with radical politics like it's a game, or a hobby, or a lifestyle choice. And my meanness/judgement seems to be for the selected few. I don't feel judgemental when I organise with working class people, or when I'm supporting new people to get involved. I think it's the self-identifying anarchists which generate my most internal commentary. And unfortunately, this means very close friends and comrades, and I end up hating myself for my thoughts.

It is clear that right now, none of these beliefs are serving me or the struggles

> **SO I FEEL LIKE JEKYLL AND HYDE. AND THEN I HATE MYSELF FOR HATING ON PEOPLE, FOR JUDGING AND CRITICISING PEOPLE.**

I organise in. They are not helping me organise more sustainably, or be a nicer person, or enjoy my interactions with my friends and comrades. They stink of

protestant work ethic, and instead of the church, I'm serving the non existent gods of anarchism.

As part of addressing these beliefs I'm going to try and:

• Identify the values I hold which might be underlying the belief e.g. I value hard work, honest communication, persistence and so forth.

• Identify where I may have collected this belief. Maybe it was a role model in my life as a kid, or in a political book/zine.

• Identify the harm this belief or worldview causes in movements and struggles.

• Re-frame this belief positively, deconstruct and reconstruct so that it is nourishing and useful. And try and find some new beliefs/statements about organising that value people and their energy.

I've also been trying to meditate, only 15 minutes a day, but at least to try and cultivate some mindfulness so my emotions aren't so raw and reactionary, and I can find some distance from them before hurting people I love and care about.

And to anyone who has been on the receiving end of my judgement, who has felt they weren't doing enough and lessened their self-esteem because of comparing themselves to me and my unsustainable way of life, or to anyone who has left a group because I set a brutal pace… I'm sorry with all my heart for the harm I've caused. That includes you Nicole Rose, you have received years of this self-battering, internalised oppression, never-doing-enough, complete bullshit. It's time to change.

3

TRANSFORMING NOT WITHDRAWING

I recently disclosed to the world how I was feeling in my first blog about burnout. I then dived straight into the personal, looking at some underlying beliefs which have been propelling my actions in my second post. Since writing and sharing these I have had such amazing support and feedback.

What has been interesting and unexpected, however, is how people have been interacting with me as if my post was a goodbye-letter, as if I was withdrawing from my work as an organiser and taking a step out of it all. It's made me think how potentially this is a standard response, that people need time away from their stress triggers, or simply can't interact with people any more and take a solid step out.

But this isn't how I feel. I don't want to drop out. I don't want to address my challenges by trying to remove them. I could easily go and spend some time in a woodland or in a retreat, and feel as calm as a pond, but then how will I feel when I have to interact with prison officers again? Or when my best friend slits his throat to self harm? Or even just handling the sensory stressors of a city?

> **I WANT TO ADDRESS MY BURNOUT WHILE STILL BEING INVOLVED IN STRUGGLE, AND WHILE STILL LIVING IN THIS TROUBLED CULTURE. I WANT TO WORK ON TRANSFORMING MYSELF AND MY SITUATION, NOT IN A FARAWAY LAND, BUT HERE, RIGHT WHERE I AM NOW.**

In my second post, I articulated how I wanted to look at root causes, well right now I am trying to explore structural and systemic reasons why people

can't reduce the chronic stress of their lives. Race, class, gender, ability, sexual orientation and all the multiple forms of oppression that harm us cannot be confronted as individual issues, likewise 'self care', in my perspective, shouldn't be approached like this either. Imagine saying to someone in Palestine that not burning out was their personal responsibility.

We are socialised to think that self care is a very personal, individualised responsibility. Because we are atomised by capitalism and sold the archetype of the individual who succeeds because of grit/determination/cunning or intelligence. Any inability to cope or succeed becomes an individual failing. When we internalise that failing we become better wage slaves and consumers; our self esteem is low and we are hopeless that alternative ways of life are possible.

My mum had a nervous breakdown when I was 11. It was the climax of years of chronic stress and the grim reality of poverty as a single parent. I remember her weeping and howling. I remember her being silent and lifeless in her darkened bedroom holding on to one of my cuddly toys with all she had. My mother sees this as 'reactive depression', due to moving to a new area, no friends, new job, in debt, no financial support from my father. But what is interesting is the breakdown happened shortly after securing her first job as a mental health nurse. She could access sick pay for the first time. She could finally collapse but know she could (just about) feed her children. After this experience, I told myself I would never break down and I would never be depressed. I found any poor mental health of others draining because of my childhood, it became a 'red flag' that made me cut relationships short and repress my own feelings over and over again in allegiance to my pledge. (NB – My Mum is still the bravest and strongest person I've ever known).

I'm fortunate I don't have kids right now! But for nearly my entire life I've had very real caring responsibilities that meant withdrawing/burning out was not an option. Whether it was looking after my mum when I was a child, supporting a close friend as a teenager surviving cancer, supporting partners in prison, or over the last several years supporting my best mates Sam and Taylor in prison, or finally nursing Gilly before she died. Let alone campaigns and projects resting on my shoulders. There have always been multiple reasons why dropping those spinning plates was not an option.

Even right now as I try to address my burnout, I know that without doing paid work I can't support my mates inside, can't pay my rent etc. And for nearly every working class person that sells their labour to survive, not doing this

means debt, homelessness or worse. People withdraw through alcoholism, drug addiction and so forth. And when you have little or no access to support, even prison is a form of respite. Likewise being sectioned or held in institutions has been one of the only withdrawal options for many of us.

In China, some companies have placed nets around their buildings to prevent workers committing suicide. That is their only option to withdraw other than resistance (which means prison or death). For working class communities it has always been live working or die fighting.

So this blog really is more about the structural factors affecting burnout and the privilege and power of different options in response.

The longest I've gone without a prison visit was two weeks. I can't take a few months off to swan off to the south of France or try and 'live without money' so that I feel less entrenched in the capitalist sinking sands. For sure there are practical interventions I can make, and for sure I will blog about them. I'm more privileged than most that I'm white and the whole world is structured to benefit me.

My main message here is that we can't look at self care through an individualistic lens. I'm trying to take responsibility for my health but I'm not going to minimise other systemic factors that make me ill or cause me chronic stress, like the prison service, or selling my labour. Or that I breathe in polluted air, that the food I eat is most likely grown with pesticides, that I'm growing up in patriarchy and so forth. So let's stop internalising our failures, or hating ourselves for not coping with this world. We are not meant to cope. This world is not designed to benefit us, it's designed to benefit the few at the top.

> **BUT IT IS OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO FIGHT BACK, TO RE-DESIGN, AND THAT'S WHY ENGAGING IN STRUGGLE IS SELF CARE FOR ME. IT'S ALWAYS BEEN MY THERAPY, MY SUPPORT, MY SENSE OF PURPOSE.**

So I'm not going to take that away from myself. I'm going to try to heal and transform not just myself but the collectives I work in through this growth in understanding, not through abandonment. I want to transform not withdraw.

We need to see self care, or even just 'care' generally, as a collective struggle. That's why I'm doing my best to write about my personal journey, publicly. The personal is political and there are so many things we need to change about our movements and our society to actually mean that true nourishment is no longer

a pipe dream. Until anarchists and other people committed to social change give radical attention to how we care for each other, we will always burn out, we will always feel unsupported and we will remain dependent on state institutions that dehumanise us.

Withdrawal is not an option, but transformation is.

4

HOW DO I GET OUT OF THIS MESS?

A few weeks ago I admitted to the world how burned out I am feeling and shared my commitment to blog about the journey in recovering. So far I have started to explore core underlying beliefs about organising, and looked at the bigger social-political context of burnout and self care, articulating how I have no desire to drop out, but want to transform my life, my projects and ultimately, the conditions of our existence.

Which has brought me to the place of ok, what now? It was a big step to share what was happening, but now, what am I going to do about it? I texted a close friend and asked him how he deals with overwhelm. He simply replied "Short term goals and getting through each day".

Even though I am an absolute sucker for goals, I'm trying not to make this process goal orientated. I kind of need some respite from the sense of striving to achieve something, a pattern I know that has driven me to burnout. However a bit of structure always seems to help, in my opinion! In Gaia University there is a concept of 'liberating structures', where basically we need some structure in order to support ourselves and our work, but not too much to be repressive or constraining, hence the term 'liberating structures'.

The aim of this blog post is to explore some liberating structures for overcoming burnout.

In a recent questionnaire as part of a teaching course, I scored about 18/20 as being a 'concrete sequential learner'. It basically means I like order, logical sequences and getting the facts. It's why I have a love-affair with bullet points. Non-linear, metaphysical, random, abstract things fry my brain. Folks who give long-winded explanations, transverse topics and are generally chaotic have me

gnawing on my hand. So a lot of healing modalities (and their well-meaning practitioners) just push my buttons.

Identifying useful tools that work for me is important, and it's also important that they are congruent with my politics and need for evidence. I don't mean this in the sense that everything has to be peer-reviewed, I'm well aware of the dominating nature of the scientific establishment and the harmful effects of reductionist thinking. For me, tools that I trust are those with thousands of years of implementation (like herbalism, or even some rituals/shamanic practices that communities have used to connect with the land for millennia), those that come from people I trust; like respected practitioners and friends that have benefited from them personally or with people they know intimately.

Setting my own criteria for healing strategies

• Holistic, not reductionist

• Ecological

• Placed in social-political context. Awareness of bigger patterns of oppression/ecosystem health/societal structures etc. Congruent with my politics

• Non culturally-appropriating

• Strong evidence base and actually effective

• Ideally DIY/Empowering/Horizontal – I want healing to be an empowering experience that connects me to my body, not disassociates me with it, or leaves me feeling powerless, guilty, anxious or body-hating. I want to work with practitioners as allies, and challenge the power-over dynamic of reductionist/capitalist healthcare

• Accessible – I can financially and energetically afford whatever the support is.

Grouping themes

I have now tried to identify all the work I want to do in overcoming burnout in my life and context, and tried to group these threads into themes. I tried to make a snazzy acronym but failed!

• **Worldviews and Beliefs** – Addressing underlying beliefs that propel me that may be harming me and others. Critically reflecting on worldviews about social change. Reconstructing beliefs and worldviews that nourish me and the

movements I organise in. Developing positive affirmations.

• **Structural Changes in my Collectives and Projects** – Addressing workload sharing, support infrastructure, toxic communication or behaviour, roles and responsibilities and so forth. Mapping support webs. Dissemination of learning to support more ongoing radical change.

• **Holistic health and Well-being Interventions** – Interventions in my life to support my physical and psycho-emotional well-being and resilience. Nutrition, herbalism, exercise, bodywork, counseling, other therapies and so forth.

• **Re-calibration of Desires and Passions** – Re-finding the why behind what I do, prioritising projects and making more effective choices about what to give my time and energy to. Letting things go, visioning and re-discovering my self/desires/passions.

• **Shadow Work** – Processing my bereavements and other traumatic events. Spiritual and energetic work. Radical honesty and deepened self knowing of all sides of my self. The non-linear, deep, complex scary stuff!

• **Regenerative Organising Design and Implementation** – using design thinking to apply all the above personal and political work to my life. Identifying habits to anchor, and short and long term goals. So that my organising isn't just sustainable but regenerative – it gives me energy, nourishment and pleasure.

All of these require multiple cycles of observation, analysis, design thinking and decision making and implementation. Expect a lot of blogs!

In starting a lot of this work already, it is so easy to slide into oppressive ways of thinking about myself and others. It's probably also very easy to read some of the healing/self care type books and start to really believe in those magic unicorns that will save us. Therefore, I'm going to try and keep myself thinking critically by asking ongoing critical questions.

Ongoing Critical Questions

• Is this 'performing' self care to others? Or is it genuinely nourishing to me?

• Is this pacifying me in any way?

• How individualistic is this practice? What is the collective response?

• Is this practice reproducing oppressive logics in any way?

• Is this practice body-positive? Is it problematically dualistic e.g. Pure/white/enlightened vs dirty/black/fat?

• Is this practice supporting me to simply be, or is it about the productivity paradigm? (staying calm, disciplined and productive)

• Is this practice encouraging any kind of emotional regulation, repression of desires or limiting of my own needs for others (or society)?

• How liberating is this practice? What role can it play in collective liberation?

5

THE BIOLOGY OF BURNOUT

This blog post is about the biology of burnout. The last two months I've pretty much been in bed. The cartilage in my rib cage is inflamed and I've been diagnosed with costochondritis. Unable to do much that is physically or emotionally taxing without causing painful flare ups. It literally feels like someone is scraping the insides of my ribs with a scalpel, or stabbing me with a knife every time I take a deep breath. As a result of this, I've had this deepened connection with my body, and had a craving to understand its biology.

The effects of chronic stress

Stress in itself can be great. There are multiple definitions but my favourite is 'stress is any change to which you must adapt'. Because it makes it sound sexy and fun, like a challenge. Stress can and does test you and challenge you in good and bad ways. Physiologically, in a shameful attempt at a brief explanation – stress can trigger this well-known 'fight, flight or freeze reaction' that increases nervous system activity, releases adrenalin, increases heart rate and blood pressure, constricts blood vessels and mobilises the liver's energy reserves through the release of stored glucose. This bad-ass evolutionary reaction can save your life.

However if stress is continuous then the adrenal cortex itself becomes increasingly involved in the stress reaction. The anterior pituitary gland releases the adrenocorticotrophic hormone (ACTH) into the blood stream which controls the activity of the adrenal cortex. Sounds well clever eh? What the hell are adrenal glands? I kind of imagined weird nodules in my neck or something, but actually they are small structures sitting on top of your kidneys.

This chronic kind of stress is well documented to be harmful. In the 'The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook' (that I'd highly recommend), the authors write:

"Unfortunately, when the fight or flight response continues unchecked during times of chronic stress, something else happens that can have long term negative effects. Your adrenal glands start to secrete corticoids (adrenaline or epinephrine, and norepinephrine), which inhibit digestion, reproduction, growth, tissue repair, and the responses of your immune and inflammatory systems. In other words, some very important functions that keep your body healthy begin to shut down" **[1].**

So whether you like it or not, long term stress is physically affecting you, and like me, you may not be aware of it at all until getting sick. We are not valuing our bodies in our struggles. My personal feelings are that in anarchist/activist circles, we kind of underplay stress. It becomes an individual/atomised game of who is strong/weak/able to cope/not able to cope. We brush off traumatic experiences because we have a tendency to either perpetuate a macho culture, or because we minimise our experiences in relationship to the oppression we are fighting. For example, I don't think what I might go through is stressful, because I'm on the outside and can access support, compared to my mates that are locked up in jail. So this constant minimisation/comparing game gets us nowhere, our personal struggles become our secrets and the impacts of what we're doing in our lives are not acknowledged or acted upon. We just struggle on.

It's hard to identify a body system that stress doesn't affect. Stress can affect the reproductive system, reducing fertility, and extended periods of depression can result in osteoporosis (we are literally carrying stress in our bones). Chronic stress makes your heart work hard for too long, putting you at risk of strokes and heart attacks. Under stress, your liver produces extra blood sugar (glucose) to give you a boost of energy. Unused blood sugar is reabsorbed by the body. If you're under chronic stress, your body may not be able to keep up with these extra glucose surges, and you may be at an increased risk of developing type 2 diabetes [2].

Ever felt how your muscles tense up when you're stressed? Well what if that repeats and repeats and repeats? You got it. Muscle pain. I once spoke to a guy

who does bodywork at a permaculture event. It was maybe two years after I had left prison at most. He told me my body looks like I'm always ready for a fight. Kind of hyper vigilant and protecting my main organs. I realised for so long I'd been rolling my shoulders inwards as a result of 'keeping my head down' in jail and always subconsciously being aware of danger (fights, attention from screws etc.), as well as from the impact of living under close police surveillance for two years before my arrest.

There are a bunch of scientific theories about stress; looking at stress as a stimulus, stress as a response and stress as a perceived threat. The stimulus theory is interesting because it highlights our uniqueness – for some, going out raving is an absolute joy, for others, loud music and strangers might be their idea of hell and as a result be super stressful. Likewise, we might respond to a stress stimulus differently depending on our situations and physicality. Like when going on a prison visit is way more miserable with PMT and a bad night's sleep.

I think the perception theory is perhaps the most interesting. And maybe sheds a tiny bit of light as to how so many amazing organisers cope with full-on situations. How stressful we experience situations can be magnified by our perceptions of them. Think divorce is the worst thing in the world? Then your parents splitting up is going to be unbearably stressful. This theory, I think, is what compensates for organisers being able to cope with stress and pressure. Maybe the relish we take in street battles with police actually strengthen us, because of our perception of the situation (but even if we perceive it as exciting or not frightening, our bodies are still pumping those hormones).

Likewise, it is well documented how stress relates to control, and how much of it we have, with the most stressful situations being those when we feel helpless. So yes, fighting fascists on the streets is probably going to be scary and stressful, but having support around you and feeling in control of situations will reduce the effects. On the other foot, perhaps experiencing repression and feeling a loss of control (through things like being arrested/detained/imprisoned/not knowing what will happen in long term legal cases) will heighten the physiological impact of stress.

The biology of burnout

For a while, I kind of thought burnout was more a psychological thing with physical repercussions. It was how I was feeling emotionally that was affecting how I was feeling physically. However I've realised through this research that actually all my lifestyle choices, despite my consent and active pursuit (even

admittedly large enjoyment/embrace of certain situations that others may feel are stressful), were/are having physiological impacts in my body. That I had completely, utterly underestimated. I had made my judgements on my day-to-day evaluations of my health: that I didn't get colds very often, I loved kickboxing, had sustained energy and very positive mental health. Meanwhile my body was actually slowly getting more and more affected by chronic stress than I had realised, affecting my ability to cope and 'bounce back' when needed. Now I can see that actually my body is affecting my feelings, and I'm not completely dominated by emotion after all (but hell, they were never separate anyway before good old Descartes).

A super interesting doctor and researcher, Esther Sternberg, writes how chronic unrelenting stress can change the response to stress itself:

"Some studies are beginning to show that burnt-out patients may have not only psychological burnout, but also physiological burnout: a flattened cortisol response and inability to respond to any stress with even a slight burst of cortisol. In other words, chronic unrelenting stress can change the stress response itself. And it can change other hormone systems in the body as well." [3]

So situations that I've been faced with a hundred times, like organising massive events, demos, prisoner support etc., which I don't perceive as unusually stressful but probably ignite that response in my body, I now am struggling to respond to because those hormones just aren't playing ball anymore.

Well-recognised physical symptoms of burnout might include: exhaustion, fatigue, depression, insomnia, headaches, gastrointestinal problems (especially ulcers), frequent colds and flu, weight loss or gain, shortness of breath, hypertension, high cholesterol, coronary disease, impaired speech and 'sexual dysfunction.' [3]

I actually remember saying to my Mum last year I felt like something was chemically imbalanced in my brain. I knew this because everything I was facing I knew I could cope with and have interacted with hundreds of times, yet I was hyper emotional, with debilitating PMT and symptoms of depression - something was amiss in my cells, and I could feel it.

Both fascinating and scary is that burnout literally changes the brain. One experiment with a control group and burnout group, doing a variety of tests over time showed that burnt out individuals demonstrated less control over

their reactions to negative experiences (kind of like a spiral of doom). The participants had regular brain scans, and you could see how burnout is literally changing their brains. The self-identified burnt out participants had a pattern of the amygdala being enlarged (part of the brain associated with fear and anxiety), and other connections in the brain were weaker, meaning that task responses were slower [4]. So they may have taken longer to complete simple tasks (hello, that's why my email inbox processing is so slow).

I'm doing a very bad job of trying to summarise a scientific article in a paragraph, but what I'm trying to get at is that actually long term stress/ overwork is having a biological impact which is affecting your behaviour, feelings and ability to function and thus ability to cope with stress.

The physiological effects of grief

The physiological effects of grief are also documented. A recent study showed people who had lost a love one can have reduced immunity because of reduced functioning in their neutrophils – a white blood cell used to fight off infections [5]. My best friend Gilly died just over a year after a super close friend of ours, Jo, had died (Gilly's best friend). The grief and depression as a result of it literally weakened her immune system. While researching this blog, I found an article in the Telegraph describing how researchers found that hip fracture can also lead to this same hormone balance that suppresses the immune system, meaning infections like pneumonia are more likely to occur and be fatal [6]. (Gilly fractured her pelvis three months before she died).

Seeing a local herbalist and talking through a timeline of getting ill made me realise that I had caught a cold on the anniversary of Gilly's death and went to hospital the day I buried her, a year exactly to the day. In Traditional Chinese Medicine the lungs are associated with grief. Even though it had been a year, it's likely that feeling grief in the same physiological way, in the build up to the anniversary, most likely weakened my immune system and reduced my ability to counter my chest infection and its subsequent development of costochondritis.

So what is the point of this long blog post?! Well my key points are:

• Burnout isn't just psychological e.g. not coping, or being unhappy with your life – it's actually intimately related to brain chemistry and your physiology.

• Chronic stress reduces your ability to then cope with more stress. Those

damn hormones again.

• These physiological changes can affect everything – from how you're feeling emotionally (like feeling depressed/tearful) to your ability to complete tasks that you have probably completed easily and quickly a hundred times before.

Taking this holistic, but scientific worldview can actually be really empowering, explain a whole bunch of symptoms of burnout and why you feel out of control of how you feel (like you literally can't get up early if you try or you can't concentrate on tasks). So please don't punish yourself or feel like a failure.

The good thing is there are ways to nourish your body and address the physiological impacts of chronic stress, which in turn could genuinely support you in recovering from burnout. I'll definitely blog about this in the upcoming weeks, as I know they are really helping me heal and get my energy back.

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6

PATRIARCHY MAKES ME TIRED

In my last few blogs I've tried to explore burnout from different perspectives with the lens of my own experience and reflections. The feedback has been moving and at times overwhelming, with tens of people emailing saying they had been feeling similar things, or observed similar patterns in themselves, their groups and movements. There has also been a very individualised response, that burnout is the necessary consequence of not looking after myself properly, and that after this I will finally take care of myself. The sense of guilt and shame has weighed heavy – is it my fault that I've developed these unbearable chest pains for the last three months? If I had only done X, Y, Z I wouldn't be feeling like this.

I've just started sessions with an acupuncturist who said actually I'm in very good health and could have faced even more dramatic health consequences had I not been so pro-active in my self care e.g. that I'm vegan, addicted to vegetables, use herbs as tonics, exercise, rarely drink or use drugs and so forth. I thought to myself, wow, maybe I have been looking after myself better than I had realised. I perceive myself as a bit of a workaholic, yet scrolling through my phone are lots of pictures of 'downtime' and precious hangouts and mini holidays with mates, or medicine making sessions.

So which one is it? And how much does personal responsibility weigh in on our likelihood to burn out? What role do groups and the wider system play? I've already touched on this slightly, but for now I want to focus on gender and all the gendered reasons why engaging in social struggles burn me out as a (white) cis working class woman. Hell knows how people feel when all the other forms of oppression come into play.

Unable to sleep this morning, I wrote a list of all the things that tire me out, exhaust me and wipe me of energy when organising in 'radical' movements, and which ones are gendered. Please note this is the accumulation of years and years of working with cis-men and isn't targeted at any one particular group. I have some amazing male comrades, you know who you are! Likewise, reference to women and men is not meant in a biologically reductionist way. When I say women I am generally relating this to women (trans women are women!) and femmes. Ok here we go:

• Being continuously taken for granted in projects and at events that I will fill in the details, remember the food/recipe/equipment/toilet roll or whatever. And you guys don't have to worry because mummy Nicole will remember everything. This makes me tired.

• The constant emotional labour of caring about group dynamics, about supporting new people to feel welcome, or to mediate conflict, makes me tired.

• The invisible emotional labour of supporting people experiencing repression or trauma makes me tired.

• The invisible labour of admin to make things happen – emails, website updating, texting people etc. – that is completely unvalued, makes me tired.

• Engaging in social struggles when having other huge caring responsibilities in my life (that are also invisible in society and also exhaust me), makes me tired.

• Comparing myself or being compared to other people that are more 'active' because they do not have these caring responsibilities in their lives weighing on them, makes me tired.

• When women comrades have to both carry emotional responsibilities in groups, and then emotionally labour at home supporting their partners who are unable to express their feelings in a male dominated collective. This is tiring.

• Repressing all my desires to be emotionally expressive in groups for being perceived as weak, vulnerable, 'a loose cannon' or hysterical in a male dominated group, makes me tired.

• Worrying about my appearance because of not only society's beauty standards, but subculture imposed beauty standards, makes me tired. Comparing myself to those that have the time/energy to invest in their appearance because they do not have the above said responsibilities, makes me tired.

• Being able to do more organising work because my paid work is more flexible, but precarious and worse paid, makes me tired.

• Losing money and livelihood opportunities to compensate for men being unable or unwilling to take time off work to invest in organising, makes me tired and broke.

• Watching dudes over and over again be unwilling to do invisible tasks such as admin, letter writing and so forth, yet take on any jobs which give them status and visibility, makes me tired. Whether that's serving food at a fundraiser (but not cooking the food, cleaning the kitchen or organising the event beforehand), or doing more militant actions.

• Being judged as a woman, that we are somehow less radical or militant because we are less confident about kicking the shit into fascists, because we have most likely had the experience of assault or abuse and are less socialised in fighting and physical aggression. This is tiring.

• Our friendship being used to validate your gender or other radical politics as a man, makes me tired.

• When my main opportunities for accessing social or emotional connection or support from male comrades involve going to male dominated spaces like pubs, where people will stare at/objectify me, come on to me (thus commenting on me if I reject them), and if crowded will attempt to grope me or harass me, yes this makes me tired and makes me not want to hang out with you.

• Likewise being invited to free parties, raves or clubs and told I'm no fun because I don't want to go, because I'm sick of being re-triggered or repeatedly sexually assaulted by people on drugs, makes me tired.

• Being perceived as frigid or straight because I don't feel safe to be intimate or less boundaried with a bunch of strangers. Especially in a queer subculture or space. This makes me tired.

• Being talked over or talked down to at events and in meetings, makes me tired.

• Only achieving status and airtime for my political opinions and ideas because I've been in prison. This *really* grates me. The fact that women, especially young women, do not have influence or validity, while new young able bodied (white) men can, and are listened to and embraced. The fact that I'm a nobody until I've been to prison, and that being brutalised by the state is some badge of honour, really, really, really makes me tired and sad.

• Actually, when men are only interested in getting involved in a particular

campaign, event or project because you want to fuck me. Your campaign effort relates to your sexual conquest, after which your interest wanes because it either happened or didn't. Literally go screw yourself.

• Being exhausted by calling people out. Even not just about gender. Even just having to repeatedly ask for support, because my labour is so unvalued and invisible, makes me tired.

• Fearing the expected status loss from talking about gender dynamics publicly, makes me tired.

• Supporting women and non-binary friends and comrades also deal with the above makes me tired. As does supporting people respond to or recover from assault and abuse in our movements makes me tired.

• And finally, when the weight of responsibility in observing and raising these issues weighs on women, and the fault lies in me for tolerating this behaviour. I forgot, I need to fight back and smash patriarchy at all times. Well I'm sorry if I don't have the energy to do this in meetings alongside my millions of other caring responsibilities, emotionally labouring for everyone, doing all the invisible labour that sustains the group… I will try harder to ask for support and call people out…! God forbid someone might ask how you're feeling or actually observe the weight and pressure and do something to help.

The impact of lunching out

In my exploration of burnout, in my depths of self-doubt and shame, I've tried to see patterns, not to shirk responsibility but to see what needs to change so that I can interact with and experience political struggles in a more liberating way.

Another driver of burnout I've witnessed is repeated patterns of people 'lunching out' and the effect on those holding the fort. Lunching out is a catch all phrase for folks that don't follow through on what they said they would do, but not communicated their inability to do it. Therefore causing unpredicted increases of workload and strain on other people.

In Gaia University, one of the first modules is managing time and promises. This involves developing systems to be accountable for our actions, managing our lives better and most importantly, better communicating and negotiating our promises.

No one can fulfil all their promises, so it is important to communicate with honesty and negotiate them. If you can't do something, you tell people. Being ill,

I've had to regularly email my associates and apprentices saying I don't have the energy to Skype, or that my review of their work will face delay because I'm ill. The more we all communicate our ability to fulfil our promises, the less chance of harm. (I'm still not perfect, obviously!)

A lot of guys can have a big pattern of poorly managing their time because they've always had some woman in their life doing this invisible work whom they completely take for granted. It's my opinion that not taking responsibility for your calendar, commitments and communication systems within a group harms people. And lunching out has a cumulative effect on people that carry the workloads of groups, who are nearly always women.

I know not everyone has the intention of lunching out. They may be doing their absolute best to get something done but are struggling [most likely alone and unsupported] with an illness, mental health issue or long term pattern they are trying to change. Precarious housing, jobs, unexpected accidents etc. of course all happen.

A healthy group will communicate about their own limitations as individuals. Perhaps even flag up their behaviour patterns if needed and the support they need to get things done. I'm sure a lot of why I'm feeling so shit right now is because most of my adult life as an organiser, I've been continuously left holding huge weights on my own. It accumulates and weighs heavy as I ache for rest and respite.

So my questions for folk involved in collectives is to ask yourselves:

• How is the division of labour in your group?

• How does everyone, particularly women and non-binary folk, feel about that division of labour?

• Who tends to do the most emotional/social work of making sure people feel ok/comfortable and relaxed in the group?

• What are everybody's responsibilities outside of the group that may affect how they interact with the group?

• What is the status of these responsibilities in society generally?

• How regularly do you ask people how they are feeling?

• What challenges are people experiencing that mean people are afraid to communicate about any tasks they are unable to complete?

• How can we create more supportive group cultures where there is encouragement for honesty?

Anarchist men have given me hope and inspiration. They have made me feel safer in a fucked up world. They are some of my best friends and there are no other comrades I'd want at my side than you particular dudes. But we all have shit to learn, and I hope my recovery from burnout doesn't just rest on support and emotional labour from my comrades that identify as women, femme or non-binary.

I hope to write about this topic more and explore it from different perspectives, even get some studies noted that have done some realtime research about these patterns. I'm excited about being part of the collective change that is happening in our struggles and lives for more radical honesty, emotional literacy and mutual aid.

7

COMPOSTING GRIEF

I knew it was inevitable that I would be writing about grief soon. I could feel the intensity of feelings build up, my dreams recalling distress and despair. The repeated failure at trying to sleep soundly. The inability to concentrate and feel gratitude for the millions of things that bring meaning to my life.

I didn't want to write about grief and focus on the experience of losing my best friend. I have been wanting to write about grief in the context of social struggle (of course the two aren't separate for me or many others). Of how we cope with our losses, with repression, with losing comrades and even the loss of different sides of ourselves as we engage in struggles for social change. And how unresolved grief burns us out. This is my attempt.

> **GRIEF IS PROBABLY ONE OF THE MOST UNIVERSALISING OF EXPERIENCES. IT IS FELT BY BILLIONS. AND YET EVEN WHEN KNOWING HOW SHARED IT IS AS AN EXPERIENCE AND AS AN EMOTION, IT FEELS LIKE THE LONELIEST PLACE ON EARTH.**

This last year, even though I'm surrounded by a beautiful caring family and incredible circle of friends, I have never, ever, felt so completely alone.

It feels like basic tasks are one hundred times harder. The emotional heaviness rests physically on my body. To feel joy again feels like a mountaineering expedition with no compass and no map.

In the books I have been reading to try and help heal from bereavement,

authors John W. James and Russell Friedman describe grief as the conflicting feelings caused by the end of or change in a familiar pattern of behaviour [1]. Interestingly, grief is associated not just with the death of people we love, but with loss and change. The loss of relationships, homes and more. I had never viewed grief in this way and it made me realise how little we honour our grief in anarchist or social movements (let alone in society in general).

We might experience a campaign ending because of state repression. We might have invested years and years and then lost it all. Or we might lose friends to burnout, or in many parts of the world, lose our comrades to death at the hands of the state, or simply to poor health as an outcome of poverty and years of struggle. It might be that animal we had to leave behind on an action, who haunts our dreams. In a more distant, yet fully relational way, we might witness things that trigger deep sadness and despair, such as images of refugees drowning or pictures of slaughterhouses. With the relentless nature of the media documenting such tragedies, we are never far away from these feelings.

In the Grief Recovery Workbook, the authors encourage you to create a timeline of all your losses, so you can discover which of them are the most self-restricting, the most 'un-complete' and painful. I'm starting to wonder whether doing this about a campaign would be really effective too – making a timeline and looking at different events and losses and how they felt to everyone engaged. When looking with this birds eye view, you can start to see the patterns. My observation on my graph was that I could begin to see how losses accumulate, and how each one just knocks you out that little bit more. We're so busy focusing on getting through whatever it is we are coping with or working on, that we don't often look behind us. We don't often feel deeply the emotions we've repressed, silenced or minimised.

Likewise in struggles, we don't do this grief work collectively. We don't sit down and share or process what we've learnt or how we're feeling. We're lucky if we reflect at all. I'm sure one-to-one, people engage in reflective conversations, however there is no collective grieving process. We might, at the bare minimum, learn from what tactically or strategically could have been different. There might be theoretical analysis in texts or talks at Bookfairs. But no one talks about how it feels.

So I'm going to start a trend. Because no one in the animal liberation movement wants to talk about what happened all those years ago. We are all still frightened of expressing our feelings for fear of public ridicule. Because we've been socially conditioning each other to believe that our feelings don't mean

anything because we suffer so little compared to animals. Well I am completely over organising in emotionally-illiterate social movements. I am completely done supporting so many people that experience all these emotions in private, yet the movement silences them in public.

How did I feel when the animal liberation movement was battered by repression? It felt terrifying, overwhelming, frightening, rage-inducing, degrading and completely dehumanising. I felt a deep sadness, a sense of loss and isolation, despair and darkness. An intense loneliness, recurring regret, shame, hate, guilt and feelings of betrayal. I felt completely unsafe and unsupported. I felt trapped in an emotional earthquake, with no steady ground anywhere. These feelings lasted for several years, and to be honest, they still surface. What I can see now is that these feelings relate to a sense of loss; they are the expressions of my bereavement and the dissolution of my identity rooted in a movement bigger than myself. They are the shattered dream of closing a lab that still tortures thousands of animals every day. Each morning I wake up and feel like a failure. The grief cannot be 'complete' because the goal has not been achieved. The animal liberation movement in England cannot recover because it hasn't processed its grief.

James and Friedman write how we need to 'complete' our grief. Incompleteness is the accumulation of undelivered communications, large and small, that have emotional value to us. Politically, it may feel like our work is never complete, because the state still stands and the myriad of forms of oppression are still alive and kicking. But I believe movements can process grief better by reflecting on loss and change, and acknowledging how it has made us feel and what we have learnt (thus 'delivering' these communications).

In my last speaking tour in Europe, where I unfortunately got sick, I felt I finally acknowledged some of the emotional impacts that the ending of the SHAC (Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty) campaign had meant in my life. Not just the tactical learnings, the need to increase our resilience to repression, etc. – but the raw emotion of loss, regret and despair. Most likely because of my physical vulnerability, I opened up a bit more and talked about how it all felt, the regrets and the things I wished I/we had done differently. I was out of my comfort zone, that wild place where the healing happens.

> **WE MAY START TO COMPOST THIS GRIEF BY ACTUALLY INVESTING TIME IN PROJECTS THAT NOT ONLY ANALYSE AND CRITICALLY REFLECT, BUT CREATE CONTAINERS FOR US TO SHARE OUR FEELINGS.**

We could do this by producing zines, writing articles, making art, doing talks and workshops. Even just gathering as friends. We need to document our own history and not let the state tell our story. Organisers that have been going at it for a long time especially need to be called upon to share their stories of change and losses in struggles. It may help newer folk feel more prepared for the inevitable losses and the rich learning we can take from them. And while we need to honour our grief on a movement-level, we also need to acknowledge the uniqueness of our experiences as individuals in relationship to loss, and share these feelings too, so others don't feel alone in their grief and despair.

Mixing this intense personal and movement-level work is our role in honouring our fallen comrades; for whom some are heroes they have never met, for others best friends. One such project is the documentary about Barry Horne, a committed Animal Liberation Front activist who lost his life in prison when on hunger strike. I know it is as much a personal project of transforming the pain of grief into political action. Barry was a huge inspiration to me as a kid, the grief of losing him was felt by the animal liberation movement so vibrantly and fully, I will never forget it.

We have to compost our grief. We have to find the rich learning from it, otherwise nothing new will grow. To really learn, we have to feel. And to heal we have to share our feelings, in public or private. We need to validate them and use them to nourish the soil and grow stronger, more powerful and resilient resistance.

References

1. The Grief Recovery Handbook, John W. James and Russell Friedman

8

HINDSIGHT IS A BEAUTIFUL THING

I've never been one for dwelling on regrets, after all life really is too short. However I thought it might be useful to identify some of the patterns in my life that ultimately led me to this point of feeling burnt out and experiencing chronic chest pain over the last 4 months. Not for self-flagellation, but for learning, and so that hopefully some folks reading this might feel some affinity and make some changes in their lives before fully burning out. What is really exciting is now that I've identified these, and hopefully learnt from them, I can really re-design my life to be more joyful, whole, and effective. Hurrah to hindsight!

I know some people might laugh at these and think 'no shit sherlock', but actually, when you're a million percent passionate about your work or organising, when you're so used to and socialised to care for other people and put their needs above your own, this 'self-care' becomes harder and harder.

So here we go…

• I wish I had really, deeply grieved for my best friend after she died rather than trying to block it all out and keep going. I wish I had taken some solid time out from work and organising. I wish I'd read some books sooner on recovering from bereavement and I wish I'd sought support rather than trying to cope alone.

• I wish I'd timetabled in more rest and recovery time inbetween events, and not been so arrogant to think that I could just keep going with a back to back relentless schedule.

• I wish the collectives I work with had a more supportive expenses policy – that I wouldn't feel bad about spending group or campaign funds on proper food for myself while on tour or at events. I wish I had spent this cash on decent

wholesome meals and healthy snacks, rather than going without or buying the cheapest things possible that gave my body nothing of value other than enough energy to get through the day. I wish I'd paid more to get trains at sensible times that didn't exhaust me in the same way as the late nights and early starts.

• I wish I had nourished my body with more herbal tonics, wild plants and organic produce rather than trying to save time, money and energy going for poorer quality food. I wish I had really taken vegan nutrition advice seriously and not thought I was super healthy just because I wasn't eating kebabs. I wish I'd taken B12 and other vitamins sooner.

• I wish I had talked to my friends about my feelings way before they spiralled into something more serious. I wish I'd talked openly in my groups and projects about the despair I feel, about how emotionally difficult organising around prison struggles can be for me, and how much I carry the weight of the workload. I wish I'd communicated to my workers' cooperative about how unsupported I felt.

• I wish I had stretched more, or done some form of more gentle nourishing exercise to counteract the intensive circuit training and kickboxing I was doing. (And again, not stretching properly before/after to save time, so I could do campaign tasks on my computer etc.). I wish I had valued the importance of massage and chiropractor treatments and accessed support for my neck and back pain from too much driving and computer work.

• I wish I had just listened to my body and really observed how exhausted and run down I was feeling.

• I wish I had read or learnt more about the effects of long term stress on the body, and been more self aware about what I was subjecting myself to for so many years. I wish I didn't take my health for granted and assume health meant the absence of illness.

• I wish I had started counselling sooner after prison so that I didn't hurt so many people I love, through my failure to commit, feel vulnerable and let myself be close to people. I wish I hadn't been afraid to tell people I love them.

• I wish I had taken more time off and actually spent more time with people I love. Like swimming in rivers, hanging out at the beach or just spending more time in my garden. Not many people say this, but I actually wish I'd just gone out more partying and hanging out with my friends. I wish I had prioritised going to hardcore shows. I wish I'd just stayed in bed and had morning sex rather than be a workaholic. I wish I'd loved my partners and friends more fully, been more available to them, and opened up to more love and care that I denied myself.

• I wish I had prioritised my sleep. I wish I had told work and campaigning to wait until I'd got all the hours my body needed.

• I wish I had not let the fear of judgement from my friends, or the anti-spirituality nature of the anarchist scene, repress my own connection to the land and my spiritual practice/feelings.

• I wish I had been with my best friend when she died rather than organising a Reclaim the Fields Gathering. I wish all those days I'd been too busy to visit because of organising, that I'd spent them with her.

• I wish on my most recent tour where I got sick, that I had just cancelled one or two events, and prioritised getting better and recovering. I wish I'd articulated to my hosts that I needed more fruit and veg, more nourishing food and more rest.

• I wish I'd told my friends in prison that in order to support and care for them over the long haul, that I needed some actual time away, even just a week, out of prison island UK. I wish I'd been more honest sooner about my financial circumstances and how it was completely unsustainable to support them alone, and that I needed to visit less to save money. I wish I'd asked for more help from my friends and family to cope emotionally with the weight of supporting them over the last 8 years.

• I wish I'd set more boundaries between all my different roles and my own down time. I wish I'd overcome the guilt and emotional barriers to doing this. I wish I felt more confident to say no and to call people out on things they hadn't done, rather than constantly soak up the slack.

• I wish I had taken my own personal finances more seriously sooner and recognised the long term impact of living with scarcity and poverty. I wish I'd unlearnt some of the psychological trappings of earning money when you're an anti-capitalist!

• I wish I'd recognised and celebrated more of my achievements, as an individual, and within the projects and collectives I organise with. I wish I'd had more mentors or more external feedback to say "actually, you're doing great", rather than feeling lost at sea or on a treadmill of never-ending organising.

• I wish I'd known as a younger self that to be effective doesn't mean all or nothing struggle, and the total repression of the self. That actually we are most effective and have the most potential for revolutionary impact when we are whole; our own passionate, authentic selves.

Now I've listed all of these, do I feel full of regret? No! I wouldn't have

learned these if I haven't had taken risks. There is a Stay Gold song where it says: "Only cowards make their choices out of fear". I'm not into the whole 'cowardice' framing of behaviour, however this song has always played out in my heart, because I've never wanted to not do something because I was afraid. I could have easily gone on tour, fought off the infection and be merrily not experiencing pain right now. But I wouldn't have had this rich learning. Learning that will hopefully change my life forever. I hope people reading these can start to make some of these changes in their own lives too. So don't beat yourself up. No regrets. Just learning.

9

WHEN CLASS IS A STRUGGLE

This current post has felt hard, but necessary, to write. I have so many middle class friends and comrades that I adore. This post certainly isn't directed at everyone. It's the culmination of years and years of organising in different projects, coming up against similar frustrations. It's also the outcome of lots of conversations between working class mates and organisers who have felt the same.

It's important to flag up that I'm writing this as a white and cis woman in England and I'm aware of the huge privilege that carries. I've been worried this post would ignite a bit of a backlash, so I'm asking middle class folks that are triggered by this to perhaps talk to other middle class people and not email me about it. For once, please I beg you, just listen and reflect. I'm feeling too burnt out and in too much physical pain to have to listen, carry or respond to more middle class entitlement.

At the end of the post I've listed some of the character traits of middle class friends and organisers who don't drive me up the wall.

Anyhow, here goes nothing…

What makes me tired when organising with middle class comrades:

• Talking about the working class as a homogenous mass, makes me tired. Assuming certain things are working class and certain things aren't is frustrating and annoying (in terms of really awful cultural assumptions and stereotypes). Likewise talking about working class people like they're 'scum' or 'sheep' or 'brainwashed masses' is patronising and elitist. Or alternately talking

about how you can 'reach out' to the working class is also pretty problematic.

• Romanticising certain aspects of different parts of working class culture is tiring, when growing up with fuck all money and zero financial stability is perhaps the least romantic thing ever.

• Talking about working class people like we're the problem, is totally infuriating. As if our lifestyle choices are the determinant of various forms of systemic suffering. It is politically naive and dangerous.

• Fetishising intentional poverty, like it's a game or adventure (anyone remember reading Evasion?) is an insult to folk who have no choice. Feeling judged because I actually want a livelihood so I don't have to re-live the hell of not having any food in the fridge, is tiring. Unlike middle class people, we don't have a safety net. We can't play the romantic poor anarchist for ten years then inherit a trust fund. Flirting with poverty as a lifestyle choice is not the same as growing up in poverty.

• Middle class folk often interact with struggle like it is a game. You can pick and choose your campaigns and issues. You can decide when to stop or step back. You can take the moral high ground for focusing on certain issues, and you can judge anything that actually makes a difference to our lives as 'reformist' e.g. workplace organising, housing struggles, food access, prisoner support etc.

• Perhaps one of the more dehumanising experiences is when you're treated like some kind of subject/object of study for academics. I literally left a prison-related conference in tears before. Being tokenised or used to further someone's career is pretty grim. It's put me off the world of academia forever (thank god there is no entry point for me anyway).

• You expect me, and other working class folk, to get excited about your projects, campaigns and initiatives when they are not relevant to our lives. We face much bigger barriers to organising, yet we're somehow meant to do a ton of extra work on a life that is extremely challenging in terms of surviving day to day. There are no structures in place to support us to participate (e.g. travel expenses, child care support, food at meetings etc).

• We are generally organising on top of a whole bunch of other life challenges that you might not have. For example being carers or supporting mates in prison. Or recovering from trauma or the general gnarliness of alcohol, drug abuse, domestic violence etc. that you may have not experienced. (I'm *very* aware that not every middle class person has had a good childhood by the way, just trying to highlight common patterns).

• You more often than not judge our lifestyle choices and take positions of moral superiority. I think one of my favourite ever scientific studies was the one that showed people living on benefits had a lower carbon footprint than middle class ethical consumers.

• It's exhausting and frustrating when you dismiss potential comrades because of their language, background or behaviour and fail to remember it takes time to learn/unlearn how we act. If I hadn't had such solid self esteem, I would have abandoned all these movements years ago.

• It is alienating and disempowering when groups of people, in a room where middle class people dominate, talk about experiences like they are completely universal and normal. I spent a whole weekend with some folks once that repeatedly talked about which international trip they were going to take next. Seriously, it feels like we live on different planets.

• A common pattern I've observed over the last 15 years is that middle class folk are way more likely to 'volunteer abroad' or do sexy and exciting things, like go live in a tree-sit protest the other side of the world. Or participate in grim colonial projects like paint school walls in Africa or whatever. There is often a consistent failure to participate in any kind of grassroots or community organising in the UK and once again, working class organisers are left holding it all (and then being judged for not being radical enough, ha!).

• Projects and groups are picked on your needs and desires. You capitalise on opportunities that boost your career and ego or that you use for your own self promotion (like the academic that puts their name on the campaign press release).

• Middle class people can tend to dominate meetings, especially meetings and forums at public events. There is such a huge sense of entitlement that the whole world needs to hear your opinion and you have all the answers. Ever tried listening?

• Middle class people can tend to dominate movements and perpetuate a privileged position of non-violence. I've been at gatherings, protest camps etc. that have felt more like a sickly love-in with the police and power structures that be.

• It's super tiring when middle class people make unsupportive comments on our writing, grammar or language. Not everyone has had the same level of education; try being supportive, not a judgemental asshole.

• It's really patronising when you talk as if we're not smart because we might not have a degree or whatever. In my early years of organising, I can't

tell you how many middle class men would explain things to me assuming I wouldn't know what they meant.

• You leverage your privilege in response to repression. Whether this is with character references from people you know in similar positions of privilege, or simply having the financial support in your life which means you can focus on legal work. You don't think about the repercussions this can have on people that can't play this card.

• Middle class people tend to perpetuate certain paradigms, especially new age worldviews. I'm sorry but working class people are not responsible for 'manifesting' abuse or poverty. Yes, positive thinking, thinking 'abundantly' etc. is most likely useful, but wouldn't it be more useful if everyone pro-actively participated in struggling to re-structure society economically and socially? Maybe stick that on your vision board?

• Even self care is affected by class. Not everyone can go squat in a sunny country, or afford decent food or have the time to go to a yoga class. Yet the responsibility of self care is placed on the shoulders of the individual, and not worked for collectively.

• And finally, what I've observed over and over again is this inherent need for middle class people to censor, control and mediate emotions. People have a really deep fear of conflict. A deep fear of losing status and control. Like being told to be less angry on demos, or less emotional at events, or even to be more serious. Stop telling me how to feel! When you've had a life of teachers, social workers, prison screws, probation officers etc., treating you like you're a piece of shit and telling you how you should feel (and how you should act) you really don't need the same mediating middle class behaviour in your collectives that are actually trying to fight for a different way of living.

So what does this have to do with burnout?

• Navigating this stuff constantly is exhausting.

• Never feeling like you fit in to certain groups or spaces is disempowering, isolating and alienating.

• It is hard to feel supported by people who don't share your reality. You lose affinity with people, groups and networks and are more likely to burn out or drop out.

• Fighting the state or whatever organising endeavour you are doing is hard enough already without navigating a maze of middle class entitlement.

• Movements fail to offer you anything that can realistically improve your life or make surviving capitalism easier.

Like I said at the beginning of the post, I do work with some middle class comrades who I adore. I tried to think about what made them different:

• They totally own up to their privilege. They're honest about it. They take the piss out of themselves. They don't try to be something they're not.

• They're empathetic but not judgemental or patronising. They don't pretend to have lived a different life than they have.

• They take risks and do frontline work that threatens their privilege. They don't expect it to be anyone else's responsibility. Likewise they do the boring behind the scenes work too.

• They leverage their privilege to support others. That might be lending someone money, or giving them a free place to stay for a while. Or it might be informally mentoring someone to improve their writing etc.

• They're aware of their speech and behaviour, how they phrase things etc. so they are not offensive.

• They don't dominate meetings or movements or think they have all the answers.

• They practically support people to participate by being militant that events are structured to support people to get stuck in (e.g. child care, travel expenses). No one's energy or input is taken for granted.

In my next post I hope to write more about what is nourishing and what is draining about organising, so that we can all start to create more liberating and regenerative ways of working together.

10

REGENERATIVE VS EXTRACTIVE ORGANISING

In the permaculture world we use the term 'regenerative' because we don't want things to just be sustainable, we want systems to regenerate through processes that restore, renew or revitalize their own sources of energy and materials. Likewise, extractive can be seen as unsustainable and exploitative – like fracking or fossil fuels for example.

In this piece I've tried to list what I find regenerative about organising, and what can be extractive. The balance of which can lead to burnout. I'm not saying I feel all these things now, I'm saying these are some of the things I've observed over time of being involved in different collectives and struggles. I hope to explore more of these in future posts as I try to re-design how I organise in this world.

So here we go…

Extractive/Draining/Exploitative Organising

• Toxic behaviour, either one-to-one or in groups. This includes: lying, cheating, betrayal, backstabbing and harmful gossiping.

• Poor listening or not listening to each other at all.

• Bad communication – people not confirming things have been understood, not communicating if they can't do something, avoiding, hiding/burying their head in the sand which sabotages group efforts. Likewise, interacting with passive aggressive behaviour is a huge energy drain.

• Emotionally labouring/caring for everyone in an unsustainable way.

• Poor time management – people being late without communication that

sabotages meetings/events/actions. Likewise, disrespecting people's time through dominating/railroading meetings.

• Repression – obviously the violent and dehumanising nature of it. In my experience, yes, I've been emotionally harmed from being raided or arrested or put in prison. But actually the bigger cause of harm was the lack of support. When some of your best friends in the world leave you to cope with prison alone, somehow it's a wound that doesn't heal compared to memories of police kickings.

• Feeling unsupported, abandoned, undervalued and invisible in groups, collectives or movements.

• Information overwhelm – when communication mediums are abused, like email lists, and you are totally overwhelmed with unwieldy information to process – this can definitely lead to people stepping back or burning out.

• The physical challenges of organising – late nights, travelling, lack of sleep, a lot of computer time etc.

• Abusive behaviour, and also responding to it and supporting other people experiencing it.

• Contesting dominating people in groups.

• Workaholism – using organising/work to not deal with underlying emotional issues and blocking everything out.

• The feeling of overwhelm and despair in facing what we're up against.

• Emotionally repressive spaces and macho groups or people.

• Inner conflict – doing things out of obligation or habit that aren't congruent with who you are.

• When you feel totally out of balance, when you haven't seen your family for ages, or haven't done anything to develop or express different sides of who you are.

• Abandonment/loss of support/friends/identity if you burn out or step back.

• Clashing values with wider society and within movements.

• Not healing from trauma or vicarious trauma.

• Poor livelihood/income scarcity/poverty.

• Feeling like your organising is completely reactive and not building something.

• Lack of connection to mission or the 'why'. When you're so busy you forget why the hell you're doing this.

• Being stuck in patterns of ineffective strategies, or having to interact with dogmatic pacifists or the opposite.

• Getting lots of "you shoulds" from other people in the movement, or the general public.

• Never getting any positive feedback from comrades or others.

• Feeling undermined in projects/groups and experiencing a loss of agency.

• Feeling judged/belittled/patronised because you're not integrating certain self care practices in your life.

• Interacting with people that theorise relentlessly (and comment and criticise your work) but don't act.

• Damp tea towels – I describe someone as a damp tea towel when I feel like they put out my fire with their attitude or behaviour (obviously, it's good to have people that are grounded and realistic, but c'mon where is the revolutionary fire?!). These people can be critical, pessimistic, overbearing and negative, over and over again.

Are we surprised when people drop out or burn out when faced with the above?!

Ok so, here are some positives, some super nourishing, 'I'm glad to be alive' elements of organising:

Nourishing/Regenerative Organising

• Having incredible deep friendships with comrades or even less deep friendships, but experiencing an amazing sense of affinity with people you don't know so well. Building a sense of trust, belonging, mutual aid and solidarity.

• Meeting new people and being inspired by them. Meeting people from totally different backgrounds, places etc. and learning from them.

• Being with people that energise you, who may be ambitious, positive and daring.

• Having the opportunity to learn new skills.

• That feeling of 'flow' when you're really good at something and you know you're kicking ass (and you love it).

• Having your needs met – food, shelter, water, spirituality, any of them!

• Having a 'liberating structure' and boundaries; clear ideas of where your responsibilities begin and end, a sense of clarity about what you're doing and

why. Respect for these boundaries by others.

• Feeling supported, like people have your back.

• When people's actions are congruent with their politics.

• When you actually feel like you're in a space where people are committed to sorting through their shit and not perpetuating oppressive behaviour. That kind of "wow, imagine if society was organised like this" kind of feeling.

• When your work is part of a bigger struggle that is gaining traction. When you feel like you're being effective and really witnessing yields, achieving tangible outcomes and succeeding in achieving the goals you set.

• When you feel balance and wholeness in your life, in the sense that you have the time and space to cultivate and express different sides of yourself (especially when you feel supported and encouraged to do so by others).

• When you are learning and learning and learning. When I was a kid, anarchism felt like the most exciting thing in the whole world. I devoured every zine/pamphlet/book I could get my hands on (pre-internet!). It was thrilling and life changing and it's hard to keep that feeling up, but so important that we are always committed to learning.

• When you are having new experiences, seeing new places, meeting new people.

• When you are pushing your own boundaries and overcoming fears.

• When you have healthy relationships that nourish and support your organising. Like having amazing sex with fuck-yeah consent practices, and you feel totally safe and glorious in your own body. Or you feel like your partner(s) totally support your work, understand the challenges and love you for who you are.

• Having good self esteem and a sense of self-power and worth.

• Having comrades saying you're doing an amazing job, but they also love you for who you are not what you do.

• Having positive and constructive feedback delivered at appropriate times, so you can learn and grow and improve your work.

• Feeling limitless and powerful as a movement. Having a positive/ambitious/pro-active/we can do this attitude.

• Being emotionally, practically and politically supported to heal from trauma, recover from burnout and cope in crises.

• Having integrated self care practices and collectives that value these.

• Being surrounded by emotionally literate and caring people.

- Feeling passion, joy and excitement about what you're doing.
- Expressing your creativity regularly and powerfully.

I hope this list will support people and groups to design their projects in a way that is nourishing and regenerative.

11

WHEN THE CLOCK IS A LOCK: DISMANTLING THE PRODUCTIVITY PARADIGM

In this blog post about overcoming burnout, I have wanted to explore one of the drivers of workaholism – the productivity paradigm.

A long time ago, as these things happen, I had quite a strong attraction to someone I was organising with. Alas, it didn't work out but I often reflect on one of the phrases in the text that communicated the rejection. That they didn't want to lose me as a close friend or as a 'campaign machine'. That in the end 'the campaign won'. I ultimately had more value as an organiser than as a lover. The phrase 'campaign machine' has stayed with me, sat somewhere in my subconscious with a mixture of discomfort and skewed pride. While deflecting most compliments, I still secretly lapped up feedback like this – how "on it" I am, how likeable it is that I'm someone that just gets shit done; who "smashes it". My happiness and self esteem ultimately related to how much, or preferably, how effectively, I was organising.

> **IT IS PRETTY CLEAR THAT OUR ALIENATED CAPITALIST SOCIETY HOLDS THE PARADIGM OF PRODUCTIVITY CLOSE TO ITS HEART. BUT HOW DOES THIS PARADIGM INFLUENCE OUR BEHAVIOUR AS ANTI-CAPITALISTS?**

Or those that work hard not to accumulate wealth, but to fight for social transformation, or ultimately, survival? How does someone like myself, who has tried to unlearn so many parts of our oppressive culture, still have such an

ingrained and unrelenting protestant work ethic?

A Clock is a Lock

When I went to prison and couldn't organise, it felt like a death knell for parts of my identity. Yet I soon learned how to sustain self-discipline and control through studying, exercise, and in less explicit ways, supporting and organising with other prisoners. I promised my self when I got out I wouldn't 'waste a second', and this desire to not 'waste time' heavily influenced my choices of how to organise my life.

Prison makes you a bit obsessive and compulsive about time. Girls inside obsess about how much time they've done, how much time they have left, how much time in bang up, how they are going to spend their time when they get out, all the while wrestling with regrets of time spent. Tick tock tick tock, it doesn't end. There is a Balkan proverb that says, "A clock is a lock."

It was liberating in some ways; I certainly came out with a huge appreciation of my freedom and never wanting to take anyone or anything for granted ever again. However, I am almost certain it radically changed how I relate to time in my life that escalated and aggravated some of my basic personality traits and 'bad' workaholic habits cultivated through anarchist organising as a young adult. I left prison with heightened self-control, discipline, and a very real need to rebuild my self-worth through getting active again.

This was coupled with the necessity to block out traumatic experiences through working, and ultimately an intense sense of inner rage to confront the prison system when I was 'free'. The repressive controlling relationship of time, its scarcity, and a fear of returning to prison meant I had to give all I had in case one day it was taken away again.

There was a worldview, ingrained in me from older organisers, that the abusers, oppressors etc. don't stop – these systems are at it 24/7. That the people doing whatever (farming animals, testing on animals, running prisons etc.) are more successful because they are more organised. Organising then became brutally urgent and necessary (which it still is for sure).

At that time in my early political understandings of the world, I didn't see that these systems of oppression were successful actually because of the millennia it had taken to lay the roots of domination and the development of repressive apparatuses, and that these people had a monopoly of violence. Instead my failure as an organiser to never do 'enough' became internalised and hyper individualised, resulting in the vigilant control of my own life to serve these

resistance-orientated ends.

I have spent years perfecting my own system to ensure my continuing productivity – all variety of paper-based and digital systems to manage next actions, information, meetings, emails, goals – you name it, I had a system for it. My output escalated, and I took on more and more organising and responsibilities. The space I created for myself through being productive and focused didn't remain clear for rest and relaxation, it instantly got filled with yet another campaign or project. For sure I would take time out with lovers and friends, but this was in as much about feeling human as it was, to serve and sustain my own output. Rest became functional, and the bare minimum at that.

With 'downtime' at a minimum, my anger and frustration at those that would 'waste my time' grew. The drunk punks, partygoers, travelling hippies or others that resist conforming to capitalism's work ethic drove me nuts. If folks were late for meetings or to support at events, I could feel my teeth grind. The feeling of time-scarcity in my life was a very real feeling. I felt like inbetween prison visits, caring responsibilities, paid work and organising, time for myself, gardening, medicine making and for general rest and pleasure, was sacred, and those that affected that were a growing source of resentment, making it increasingly difficult to organise in a healthy way.

Productivity is King

Capitalism has a certain way of reproducing oppressive logics about our body and our actions. Productivity is king. Those who have mastered it are heroes. Those who are unproductive are lazy and worthless (hence another reason why class hatred is forever permeating into social policies). Yet we, the working class, never get to define what productivity means in our lives and complex contexts. And despite trying to unlearn lots of the oppressive bullshit society has fed me, I still am totally utterly dominated by a desire to be productive.

I thought to myself, this is ok because I want to be productive in struggle; I'm not learning to be productive to appease a boss. It is valuable to know how to get shit done quickly and efficiently. Yet in doing this uncritically, I have still been perpetuating this oppressive worldview that those that are productive have more worth and value.

The metrics still dominate – I'm actually measuring my recovery from burnout by how much stuff I'm getting done rather than how I'm feeling. It makes me nervous how so many resources relating to burnout define recovery in the context of productivity. The world wants you to get better so you can return

to being productive. That you'll be 'kicking ass' again soon. That you're 'no use' to anyone unless you are well.

So to resist the urge to individualise, I ask, how can we be impactful in our movements, yet unlearn the productivity paradigm? How can we cultivate self esteem and self-worth beyond levels of output? Where is the balance between getting shit done and being effective, and being a slave to the clock? How can we integrate 'timelessness' into our lives, by connecting with each other and the land?

Capitalism discards so many of us because of the reduction in our economic labour power (even though people are intensely exploited in other ways) e.g. the old, sick, disabled, prisoners, mothers and so forth. Yet we continue to judge ourselves and others on our output.

Well, no more! I am not a machine. I'm going to love myself and others because we are complex, messy, fucked-up, beautiful, vulnerable human beings with inherent worth. I commit to returning to health, not to be productive, but to feel more alive, whole and human.

In the words of John Zerzan:

"Can we put an end to time? Its movement can be seen as the master and measure of a social existence that has become increasingly empty and technicized. Averse to all that is spontaneous and immediate, time more and more clearly reveals its bond with alienation. The scope of our project of renewal must include the entire length of this joint domination. Divided life will be replaced by the possibility of living completely and wholly– timelessly–only when we erase the primary causes of that division." **[1]**

References

1. Time and its discontents, in Elements of Refusal, John Zerzan

12

THE RELENTLESS ROLLERCOASTER OF PRISONER SUPPORT

So far I have written about burnout, touching on multiple personal and political issues that have contributed to my current state of health. This blog post is talking about the relentless emotional roller coaster of prisoner support. Something that has sucked the life out of me and pushed me to physical, financial and emotional exhaustion.

June 11th is the International Day of Solidarity with Long term Anarchist Prisoners. People around the world organise solidarity efforts and actions. This post is dedicated to them.

I have no doubt that folks organising this support are likely to have felt the emotions I describe in this blog post. I can only really truthfully share my own experience and can't speak for others, but I know that I am one of the millions of people around the world that are deeply harmed by the imprisonment of people they love.

For the past 15 years, prisoner support has dominated my life. I have had three partners in prison and multiple close friends for whom I was (or still am) a primary support. I'm now on my 9th year of supporting my best friend serving a life sentence for a murder she didn't commit. Two years on remand, followed by 4 different solicitor firms that exploited her for legal aid and failed to make tracks – thank god we have a passionate solicitor now who is not intimidated by the police corruption in her case [1].

Another super close friend of mine is an IPP, one of over four thousand people serving indeterminate sentences in England and Wales, for a law now overturned yet not abolished retrospectively [2]. He has done 9 years, six years over his original tariff. He has lost both his parents on this sentence and

attempted suicide on multiple times. I have lost count of how many visits I have sat and looked at his stitched-up neck, only millimetres away from death. It is not uncommon to meet IPP prisoners that were sentenced to 15 months for burglary that have served sometimes over a decade. They live in purgatory, never knowing when they will be free; prison stealing their lives and what little sanity they have left.

And while I believe prisoners should be at the centre of conversations around prison, those doing the support work on the outside are also commonly forgotten and invisible. I hope this post sheds some light on the daily experience of thousands.

This is how I commonly feel:

• **Alone** – There is a loneliness in prisoner support. Politically, it is extremely under-valued work that very few people do in a dedicated way. But when it is someone you love inside, the feeling of loneliness creeps into every cell of your body. Not only do you feel alone in the experience of actually coping with what is happening, but you miss them. You miss them so much sometimes you can't breathe. If they are a big part of your life and then they are taken away; it is like a gaping hole in your existence that no one or nothing can fill.

• **Fear** – Prisons control society through fear. Likewise, the fear for people you love behind those walls starts to control your own life. I believe that prisons are inherently violent. The act of caging a human being is violent enough on its own. However prisons are still rife with violence, it is built into their very design. Every day I fear that my friends will be attacked by officers (very rarely by other prisoners but of course it happens, and frequently more so in men's prisons). I fear that they will self-harm. I fear that they will be successful in their suicide attempts. I fear they will go completely insane. I fear I will let them down or harm them if I'm not able to support them in the way that I want to. These are not 'irrational' fears, they are very real, built on years of close-calls and lived experience.

• **Lost** – When my first partner went to prison at 16, I literally had no idea what I was meant to do. I didn't know I could book a reception visit, I didn't know how much money he needed or what the hell I could write in a card. Even now, a decade and a half later, I still feel like I don't know what I'm doing sometimes. There is no manual for this stuff.

• **Anxiety** – Missing a phone call from someone in prison ignites a certain kind of anxiety in your chest, especially if it continues and you don't know

what's happening or how they are. Sitting on a phone for four hours desperately trying to book a visit ignites anxiety. A train being late before a prison visit makes you want to smash glass with your bare fists. I've got a lot better with meditation, paying attention to my breathing etc. – but some days literally the only feeling you feel is pure and total anxiety pumping through your veins.

• **Dread** – One morning I turned up to visit my friend Sam in HMP Holloway. She'd been feeling pretty suicidal but I thought she was improving. I was booked in, searched and 'processed', then sat in the busy visits room waiting for her to arrive. I waited. And waited. I asked a screw what the hold up was and they told me they'd make a call. I waited some more. I then got asked to go into a separate room. "She was taken to hospital this morning". "Is she alive?" I asked. "We cannot disclose that information". I screamed. I demanded answers but was refused them. I left with a feeling of dread that brought my guts into my mouth. I took the tube, then the train back home, checking my phone every 10 seconds. I repeatedly called the prison. Still no answers. I honestly believed she had died. Just after 5pm that night, I had a call from an officer at the hospital telling me Sam had tried to kill herself. She had quietly saved up her medication and it was a miracle she didn't die. She discharged herself from the hospital and I returned the next day to once more hold her in my arms. Every time I don't hear from her, every time she expresses she is suicidal, the same feeling of dread fills my lungs.

• **Heaviness and sadness** – For anyone that knows me, they know I'm as strong as an ox but as sensitive as a sponge. I suck it all up. Visiting prison weighs on my chest as I witness the unending brutal injustices – the thousands of people locked up for basically being poor and vulnerable, or for those that fought back and took justice into their own hands. You see human beings dehumanised beyond your imagination (and you're only seeing the ones that actually get visits). A den of trauma and abuse that is so vivid and real it haunts you. My friends that are trapped in prison and experiencing, witnessing and supporting other traumatised people need someone to offload on. So the pain parcel gets passed and you feel like you'll be buried in their suffering.

• **Shame** – There is a feeling of shame in being an ex-prisoner, or supporting people inside. Even if you're defiant and critique the prison system, you still experience the unrelenting judgement and discrimination of others. Mentioning the word generates so many associations. Even when you buy snacks at a store and wait for a minibus to take you to the jail, you know that so many people are watching you and interacting with you like you are the scum of the earth. The

prison officers treat you like a piece of shit (like they do prisoners). The media vilify you and penultimately everyone believes it's your fault that you're there or it's your fault these people in prison are your friends.

• **Exhaustion** – Sometimes holding the weight of the above on a daily basis reduces my body to an exhausted mess. Last year I did 40 prison visits, and I'm sure it's part of what has knackered my adrenals. Emotionally coping and processing these ever changing feelings is exhausting. Physically traveling to the other side of the country on a weekly basis is exhausting. Working my ass off to pay for my trains and their postal orders each month is exhausting. Organising politically around prisons and navigating the sheer judgement and prejudice is exhausting.

• **Trapped** – I love my friends in prison, they have taught me so much about what it means to be alive, to be a human being. They have been incredible friends despite the reality they face every day. Their strength and defiance have inspired me so intensely. But there is a feeling of being trapped. I can't leave England for long because my girl needs to call my landline to off-load and talk, or I want to be here to visit urgently if needed. I feel like my life is on hold even when I'm doing my best to not be limited by this situation.

• **Tiny and powerless** – My best friend did three months in segregation in HMP Holloway; she had a complete nervous breakdown after months of medical abuse and neglect. She would be brought up from seg for our visits and would tremble in fear. I've seen a lot of rescued animals with similar body language – swings of trembling and shaking followed by a frozen lifeless numbness. She was bruised from staff beatings, frequently stripped naked, and had to listen to other women being assaulted in separate cells. Her head would be swollen from banging it against the wall, cigarette burns blistered her skin. I would make daily calls to the governors. I would write card after card and book visit after visit. But I have never, ever felt so completely powerless in my whole life.

The prison system dwarfs you. Any arrogance of power you may have gained from other life experiences just disintegrates in the totality of the abuse of power in the prison system.

Knowing that someone you love is locked in a cage and there is nothing you can do to get them out other than try to navigate some bullshit system that was never designed to serve you or to be 'fair', feels like being in an ocean of powerlessness that you know you can't survive in, because no one ever taught you to swim.

> THERE IS NO ONE THROWING YOU A LIFEJACKET, AND SOON YOU WILL DROWN IN THIS DESPAIR, AMONGST ALL THE OTHERS THAT WERE ONLY IN THE SEA TO FEED THE SHARKS.

• **Anger and rage** – Finally, the only thing that does stop you from drowning is the pure anger and rage that pumps through your veins. I guess this is the 'fight or flight' feeling. When flight isn't an option, you are left fighting with everything you have. I have felt such deep hatred, such deep rage and such full-bodied desire for retribution and vengeance, I have terrified myself. But once again, these kinds of emotions are mediated in our social movements, liberals try to calm us down and quell our rage. These feelings are dangerous because they might just disrupt the systems of oppression that prop up this society, not least the prison industrial complex.

• **Emotional repression** – I didn't even realise until writing this blog the extent to which prisoner support dominates my emotional well-being. Because for all the moments that I feel the above, there are many more where I don't feel anything at all. After every distressing phone call from my friends inside, I have to 'switch off' and return to 'normal', keep responding to emails or advertising courses or whatever. Not being able to feel somehow makes all of this easier at times.

• **Unlovable** – No one wants to be around people that are sad, anxious or feeling despair, let alone on a regular basis. This culture thrives on 'positivity' and all that sickly stuff. Selfishly, one of the hardest things about prison support is that I feel unlovable. I fear that no one will want a relationship with someone carrying these kinds of 'burdens'. I don't always have the emotional energy to be there for partners. I can't travel loads, or be spontaneous. I can't always be joyful, sexy or funny, and more often than not I'll be that person leaving at the crack of dawn to make my way to another prison hell hole in some far corner of the country. The anger and rage I feel about the prison system means that I'm relentless at organising, again, not always conducive to relationships. I fear that there is a finite amount of love in my heart that is always giving out to keep my friends alive. I feel the weight of all the above so much that the last thing I would want to do is harm someone I loved by bringing this shitstorm of stress into their life.

The thing I wanted to finish on was some commentary about how we could improve the support for the supporters. Once again, these are only my feelings and I can't speak of other people's preferences or needs:

• **Show that you care.** Ask how people are. Ask how their friends inside are. Text them to say good luck on your prison visit today. Listen to them when they need someone to help them cry. Respect their wishes when they say they don't want to talk about it.

• **Practically support people.** My friends in London have been so unendingly amazing by always offering me their sofas when I need a place to stay before prison visits. Help people out with lifts, with petrol, with money. If they've had a harrowing prison visit pick them up from a train station! Give them a massage. Send them a sweet card. These small things make a huge difference.

• **Create opportunities for joy.** The only antidote to the heaviness of these feelings are the moments of bliss that remind you life is worth living and not all the human race are violent prison officers. Go swimming in the sea. Fuck. Be affectionate. Be silly. Send them stupid cat memes… whatever! Just bring joy into their life. They need it more than you know.

• **Learn about the prison system.** Read 'Inside Time'. Follow groups online. There is a phrase "Rot doesn't grow where the sun shines" – we have to keep a light on the experiences of prisoners and the reality of prisons.

• **Get involved in Prisoner Support Groups.** Organise events, write to prisoners, build relationships with them and keep prisoner support visible. I know from experience so few people do this kind of work; you may get hundreds on demos depending on the issue, but trust me I've never seen more than a handful of people keeping prisoner support groups alive. Prisoner support isn't an 'extra' or an 'add-on' to other political movements, it must be a heartbeat. Those that are behind enemy lines must not be forgotten. Likewise, prisoner support is not just for people 'specialising' in it or focusing on it – it is the work of everyone.

• **Get active to dismantle the Prison Industrial Complex.** Organise with others on every front to bring this whole brutal system down. There are some growing campaigns in England (where they want to build 6 new mega prisons) that desperately need support on every front. Here are some links:

• Empty Cages Collective – http://www.prisonabolition.org
• Community Action on Prison Expansion – http://www.cape-campaign.org
• Incarcerated Workers Organising Committee – http://iwoc.iww.org.uk

- Smash IPP – http://smashipp.org.uk
- Bristol Anarchist Black Cross (ABC) – http://bristolabc.wordpress.com
- London ABC – https://network23.org/londonabc
- Brighton ABC – http://brightonabc.org.uk
- Bent Bars – http://bentbarsproject.org
- June 11th – http://june11.org
- Support Prisoner Resistance – https://supportprisonerresistance.noblogs.org
- Fight Toxic Prisons – https://fighttoxicprisons.wordpress.com
- Wildfire – Anarchist Prisoner Newsletter – https://wildfire.noblogs.org

Thank you for listening. This struggle never ends until all are free. For the prisoners, and those that support them.

References

1. For more information about Sam's case and her appeal - www.freedomforsam.org

2. For more information on IPPs visit - www.smashipp.org and to learn more about Taylor - https://iwoc.iww.org.uk/free-taylor

13

POWER AND POWERLESSNESS

In this piece, I want to talk about power and powerlessness. I feel it's integral to exploring what can make organising for any kind of social change feel empowering or soul-destroying.

Like most kids, I felt pretty powerless over my own life. Like everyone, I had little or no power over where I lived, how much money we had, where I went to school and so forth. I had even less power over my parents' decision to break up as a four-year-old, and as I ached for my dad to remain in my life, to live in the same country as me, ultimately I was powerless to the fact that he didn't. I was powerless over my Mum's choice of partner, or which men were coming in and out of our lives. But what broke my heart the most was my inability at the time to understand my Mother's depression, and I felt completely powerless to make her feel better or to change how she felt about the world.

Now I'm older I can rationalise the situation, the reactive depression she experienced as a single parent without a safety net and little social support. But as a little girl, I just wanted her to stop crying and I had no idea how. Overwhelming feelings of powerlessness have been an undercurrent of my life ever since. I've identified these feelings as being a source of my compensating hyperactivity, workaholism and over-responsibility for others.

A friend of mine who went to a public school told me that the way they interact with you there is breeding this sense of power – that you are going to be society's next leaders and decision makers. The world is yours for the taking. Ask any working class kid, and you can guarantee that state schooling gives you the opposite feeling. I felt I had little attention either way as to whether I was 'successful'. The goal was to be happy. Happy with your lot. It's a good goal

but it still creates this lingering feeling in you that you are powerless to change anything more, be of any more influence, be more 'powerful'. I felt like there were no reverberating shocks when I skipped school, messed around with drugs, dropped out of college and ended up in prison. There is no status to lose, no shattered dream.

> **PEOPLE EXPRESS THEIR FEELINGS OF POWERLESSNESS IN DIFFERENT WAYS. SOME BULLY OTHERS, SOME TAKE EXTREME CONTROL OF THEIR BODIES THROUGH EATING DISORDERS OR EXERCISE. SOME FIND JOY IN CRIME, IN FIGHTING, AND SOME RECLAIM IT IN RESISTANCE TO THE SYSTEMS THAT REINFORCE THEIR POWERLESSNESS ON A DAILY BASIS.**

For me, I was lucky to find a gateway as a kid into a whole new world of people reclaiming their power and fighting systems of oppression. At ten years old I became connected to the animal liberation movement. I remember when I was 13 on a national demonstration against Huntingdon Life Sciences (HLS), everything just kicked off. Police lines were broken, windows smashed. The city was ours. I remember with glee watching older folks pick up horse shit and launch it at the police. I felt part of something powerful. This movement was my antidote to the all-consuming powerlessness I felt in my daily life at home. I was surrounded by amazing people, including a wonderful group of older women, who at the time as I looked at them with puppy dog eyes, seemed like the bravest, fearless and most powerful people I'd ever met.

Organising gave me a sense of power. I had the agency to make decisions. I felt useful and needed. I had support around me from these incredible mentors, from local grassroots groups and from wider networks. In SHAC's heyday (Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty – the campaign against Europe's largest animal testing company HLS), I felt part of the most powerful campaign in the world.

The repression it attracted, therefore, destroyed the movement's sense of power. This is greatly felt on an individual level. No longer part of a movement that is making waves, you feel subject to forces much greater than yourself. You feel completely overwhelmed by state power. Prison strips your personal power from you in the most brutalising and dehumanising of ways.

It is not ironic perhaps, that in prison I found design, most specifically permaculture design. It is a skill set and toolkit that can help you navigate in the depths of chaos and complexity. In prison, when undertaking a distance

learning course in permaculture, as part of the course I was given the Designer's Manual. A huge book, I had no idea of its worth and used to use it as a coffee table in my cell! However a quote in there, pinned to my cell wall, has stayed with me ever since:

"In chaos lies unparalleled opportunity for imposing creative order."
– Bill Mollison

My life felt like chaos. I had lost the campaign that was the focus of my life, lost my partner, job and home. Yet design helped me reclaim my power. I was no longer lost at sea, I had a compass and a map of my needs and desires, and it helped me heal my fragmented self, and believe there was something positive that could come from this experience.

Permaculture gave me the feeling that we have the power to re-design society, not just be constantly dwarfed by systems of power we are trying to battle. And now I've engaged with and observed the beautiful, diverse, and sometimes super problematic permaculture movement, I can begin to see where other forms of power intersect with it, such as capitalism, the state and different forms of oppression and domination.

In analysing power, I believe it is necessary to vigilantly observe patterns in our movements that reduce our power. We have to attempt to plug these spirals of erosion. These may be, for example, burnout, poor mutual aid and solidarity, repression, ineffective strategies that increase feelings of powerlessness, and smoke and mirror reactive organising that railroads our energy.

On a personal level, we can ask ourselves, what makes us feel powerless? My posts about patriarchy and class may read like cathartic rants, but actually, they are observations of what diminishes my sense of power or reinforces my ingrained feelings of powerlessness in patriarchy and an entrenched British class system.

Burnout increases feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness. I'm still not sure if it is a cause or a symptom. The relentless loss of loved ones to death, repression or change intensifies these feelings. Death and grief are perhaps the most powerlessness rendering states of all. There is nothing you can do to bring someone back, the finality is piercing.

I feel a diminished sense of power with my health. An inability to act, respond or use force in a way that demands physical energy. I ache to visit my friends that

need more practical support. I yearn to organise and blast through campaign to do lists. And yet, I am also beginning to feel the power in my vulnerability. The power of flow and trust, and the power of gentleness, healing and radical self-care.

When you have felt powerless, by feeling the tyranny of being dominated, there is little desire (in my experience) to then become the dominator – this is why for me, anarchism holds such beautiful promise.

So I ask again:

• What makes you feel powerless or powerful?

• What has helped you in the past to reclaim a sense of power or overcome feelings of powerlessness?

• How can you reclaim feelings of power without dominating others?

• How can we build power in our movements?

• And finally, how can we collectively respond to addressing the diminished power we have by working to stop losing comrades and friends to burnout?

14

WHAT THE F**K IS COSTOCHONDRITIS?! PHYSICALLY HEALING FROM BURNOUT

This piece is about my 'physical' journey to recovering from burning out. For me, my burnout manifested in a chronic illness that has knocked me sideways, reduced my activity and created space in my life for reflection and transformation. It has also caused me months of pain, distress, and despair. But finally, the last two months have seen a fast healing curve where my energy, strength, and resilience seem to be returning, albeit at a very gentle pace.

In this blog I want to share a bit of background about costochondritis, to build awareness of this condition and its effects. I will share the herbs, nutrition, physical therapies and other sources of relief that I have experimented with in the 8 months of nursing the chronically inflamed cartilage in my rib cage. I want to emphasise that I am not a health professional. Please do not substitute this blog for speaking to someone who has invested energy and time in learning about the complexities of health, like a doctor.

Likewise, I have introduced many of these different interventions slowly over time. Different things were needed at different points. It is impossible for me to say what can help heal other people's costochondritis or chronic health issues, therefore this post is literally for interest only. I want to illuminate the complexity of attempting to heal from a chronic illness and how focusing on nourishing myself as a whole person, rather than fighting some evil, invading, punishing disease, has supported my return to health.

What is Costochondritis?

Costochondritis is an inflammation of the cartilage that connects a rib to the breastbone (sternum). Pain caused by costochondritis might mimic that of

a heart attack or other heart conditions. Costochondritis is sometimes known as chest wall pain, costosternal syndrome or costosternal chondrodynia. Sometimes, swelling accompanies the pain (Tietze syndrome) [1].

There is unclear evidence about what causes costochondritis. Observed potential causes include injury, physical strain (e.g. coughing), a joint infection, tumour or some kind of other inflammatory condition such as arthritis. There is a good list online that lists things that produce similar pain. I found I had to basically work through this list and get different things ruled out (like blood clots, cancers, pneumonia, fractures etc.). Hence why I cannot stress enough to see your doctor and access those diagnostic tools.

The NHS page describes how costochondritis normally goes away after a couple of weeks. I've found so many people on forums, social media and in person that have experienced costochondritis for several months or more. Obviously, we are all unique, with so many complex factors at play in our recovery.

How does it feel

The pain definitely changes, but overwhelmingly these have been some of the daily experiences:

• Like someone is stabbing me with a knife at various points in my chest at different times of day

• That some wild animal is eating the flesh off my ribs and gnawing on the bones

• That a bag of hot needles is being scraped across my chest

• That a grown man is sitting on my chest all the time

• That a tight hot band is running around my chest and getting tighter as the day goes on

• That something is trying to tear my ribs apart

• That I can't breathe. Or when I take a deep breath I get stabbed.

• That I can't get comfortable in any position because the pain is all over my front, sides and back

• That my joints are aching, my whole body is fatigued and all vitality is gone simply fighting the pain

Things I've done so far…

Accessing Support

My incredible 94-year-old Grandad at the start of this distressing period offered to pay for treatments I needed because he loved and cared about me and just wanted me to be well. It was hard for me to simply accept his support without guilt, however, without his help, I have no idea what state I would be in right now. I am very aware that private therapies are completely financially inaccessible for folks on low incomes. This has been a recurrent theme at the Radical Herbalism Gathering, which does list many herbalists that offer sliding scale clinics. I think if my Grandad wouldn't have been able to help I would have taken out a loan or something from a credit union. Anyhow, all it does to is emphasise to me the desperate need for us to radically transform our health systems.

I really believe in DIY healthcare and self-educating. However, I also believe that we all need to access support (of course these two things are definitely not mutually exclusive). I am very aware of the power dynamics at play. However, health professionals (who I would see as someone passionately engaged in their field) have this pattern-level view of what is happening. Trust me, when experiencing a chronic illness you need all the support you can get. I cannot recommend seeking help soon enough. Over several months, I met with different professionals (with varying experiences):

• **GP/NHS** – Recommended rest and painkillers. Most specifically non-steroidal anti-inflammatories. I was so desperate I took all the pain relief they could throw at me. Unfortunately, this eroded my stomach lining and led to more inflammation connected to my digestion. The painkillers also affected my mental health and 'depressed' my system. Most of my interactions with doctors and consultants were incredibly disempowering and left me feeling dejected and despairing. However interacting with the NHS was essential in accessing their diagnostic tools and ruling out things like bone cancer, blood clots, and heart conditions.

• **Herbalist** – I worked with a local herbalist and nutritional therapist based in Glastonbury. He has been a total rock and his advice and knowledge have been pivotal to my recovery.

• **Acupuncture** – I sought help from a local acupuncturist. Over the course of several months, she worked magic with her needles on several different aspects of my health, including addressing many blockages in my energy. Most notably, I found the treatments super toning for my digestion, which was a key part of addressing the inflammatory response.

• **Chiropractor treatment** – I had two treatments that really helped me realise how my body was responding to the pain and how this was affecting my alignment.

• **Sports therapist** – I have had several treatments with a sports therapist who is an incredible professional dedicated to his field. He used both low-level laser therapy on my chest as well as myofascial release massage. He writes about myofascial release: "Its main focus of treatment is on the bodies vast expansive fascial network. The bodies fascia is an all encompassing connective tissue that surrounds, infuses, supports and constrains every muscle and organ in the body. Its continuity and endlessness means that the effect of its restriction can cause imbalance in the joints of the body which, in turn, causes an imbalance on posture. This compromises the body's ability to function at its optimum efficiency and strength" [2]. I can safely say his treatments have been an overwhelming contributing factor to healing, reducing pain and regaining movement in my body. My mum even burst into tears after the first treatment with relief!

• **Counseling** – I am incredibly lucky to live near a low-cost counseling agency that is committed to accessibility. Working with a counselor, I feel I have been addressing the underlying emotional "stuff" that contributed to my condition such as unprocessed grief and trauma. Counseling has been like a 'weight off my chest' which has made a huge difference to my wellbeing.

• **Yoga** – I was super lucky to be supported by a friend who is an experienced yoga teacher. She introduced me to some 'Restorative Yoga' positions. She describes how "the slower pace and deep breathing that you get in a restorative yoga class triggers the parasympathetic nervous system from the very first pose. This activation helps to mitigate the effects of the regular fight-or-flight stress response that can be damaging to your physiology and well-being. The overall calming effect on the nervous system sets a deeply relaxing tone for the class that comforts your mind and body down to the cellular level" [3]. I have found this incredibly useful, if not essential, to my healing process.

Herbs

Once again, I want to emphasise that I took all these herbs at different points and stages. Please don't read this list and think, yeah I'll try all that stuff! Also be sure to research contraindications because many of these herbs are not suitable for people who are pregnant or on certain medications.

Pain Relief

• I made a pain tonic tincture with a mix of Cramp Bark (*Viburnum opulus*), St John's wort (*Hypericum perforatum*), Valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*) and Betony (*Stachys officinalis*). I took a capful in water when the pain was really intense and it always did the trick.

• Willow! Ah, my favourite tree in the world. I took capsules of White Willow Bark (*Salix alba*) for ease of use and because I didn't want to go over the top on alcohol based tinctures. Its pain relieving action is actually due more to its effect on inflammation than its quantities of salicylic acid.

Nervous System Support

• I made a nerve tonic tincture – Vervain (*Verbena officinalis*), Rose (*Rosa spp.*), and Betony (*Stachys officinalis*). This triage of herbs have been a powerful support and I intend to blog about them more fully when I look at herbs for burnout.

• I have more recently been using Rosewater as an alternative to my strong rose tincture. I have about 4-5ml in a small glass of water three times a day. Rose is a beautiful herb for grief, insomnia, and depression and is also a known anti-viral.

• I have also used Valerian when I've had disturbed sleep patterns because of the pain. I find it gives me quite intense dreams and has a kind of cold, dampening effect, so don't try to use it too often. However, it is such an amazing plant!

• Passionflower tincture (*Passiflora incarnata*) has supported me in times of anxiety and stress, I take a few drops often before sleeping.

Adrenal System Support

The ability for me to recover from costochondritis is massively linked to being able to nourish my adrenal system. Herbalist Mathew Wood, in his incredible document about herbs for the musculoskeletal system writes how muscle growth and strength is regulated by hormones and that there is a constant flux between the joint regenerative hormones and cortisol [4].

• I have two cups of Licorice tea (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*) a day (not in the evenings). Licorice has been a long term plant friend of mine that saved me from burnout many times. It also tastes sweet and delicious!

Once my viral and bacterial infections were cleared up and I could focus solely on healing the costochondritis and recovering from adrenal fatigue, I

worked with my herbalist to experiment with different adaptogenic herbs. I'd recommend ordering 'Adaptogens: Herbs of Strength, stamina and stress relief' by David Winston and Steven Maine if you are interested in these plants. The herbs that I have been using, all in tincture form, at different stages in my recovery include Ashwagandha root (*Withania somnifera*), *Rhodiola rosea*, and Astragalus (*Astragalus membranaceus*). This week I also started using Siberian Ginseng (*Eleutherococcus senticosus*) after evaluating my progress with my herbalist.

I also take a longstanding hormonal tonic for when I have bad PMT. It is a tincture mix of Lady's mantle (*Alchemilla vulgaris*), Evening primrose (*Oenothera biennis*), and Borage (*Borago officinalis*).

Anti-inflammatory Herbs

• Turmeric (*Curcuma longa*) – My kind friend ordered me some amazing turmeric capsules (with black pepper and other ingredients to help increase its effectiveness) from Baldwins. These have been a mainstay amazing anti-inflammatory for me! At the beginning of my bed-bound inflamed state, I would also make a decoction of turmeric and ginger. Please note these herbs can be very warming, best to get advice before taking if you have a 'hot' condition.

• I made an anti-inflammatory tincture mix at the beginning of my recovery once I had my diagnosis. These included Chamomile (*Matricaria recutita*), Self-heal (*Prunella vulgaris*), Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), Feverfew (*Tanacetum parthenium*) and Nettle root (*Urtica dioica*).

Herbs for Cartilage

• I took Devil's Claw tablets as advised by my herbalist. I used Nature's Aid 'Joint Eeze'. I later learned that it is an endangered plant, so will not use it again.

• I made decoctions of Horsetail (*Equisetum arvense*), for its high silica content.

Topical Applications

There were also a number of herbs and oils that I applied directly on the skin of my chest to bring pain relief and support with healing; these included:

• Ibuprofen Gel – when I was really desperate. It was very cooling and definitely did bring pain relief.

• Arnica Gel – I bought this originally when I sprained my shoulders falling down the stairs (yes this totally happened mid recovery!). I then put it on my chest and realised it served the same cooling action.

• Joint and Muscle Rub – a mixture of comfrey, arnica, wintergreen, and ginger. Seriously, it was heavenly and helped so much.

• Coconut oil with essential oils – So each night before bed I would rub coconut oil on my chest (sometimes almond oil as it feels more warming) with lavender and thyme essential oils (only a drop). The thyme was great in helping shift the lingering respiratory infection.

• MSM and Silica Gel – I found this amazing gel that helps you to absorb MSM (Methylsulfonylmethane) and silica which are essential for cartilage repair. It was from France, however, a friend that could actually speak French read the ingredients and it wasn't vegan.

• Comfrey Poultices – Once the weather warmed up I began to do comfrey poultices on my chest. This was after several days of doing them on my shoulder after my fall. It was definitely after this period that I noticed a marked change in my pain levels.

• KT tape – I also had myself taped up by a sports therapist, which brought some relief to my tissues. I found that I craved putting the oils on, so in the end, I prioritised them. The tape was great if I had to do more physical movement (like be at an event where I can't just sit there and rub my boobs for pain relief!).

• Castor oil packs - This involved applying castor oil with muslin and then applying a hot water bottle. Absolutely incredible relief.

Anti-Virals, Anti-Bacterials, and other Immune System Support

When you are trying to recover from a chronic illness and unrelenting exhaustion you are going to be so susceptible to a multitude of viruses, bacteria, fungal infections and parasites. I have certainly found this. It's felt like every other week I had some weird allergic feeling reaction, or nausea, or some wild temperature changes responding to a virus (NB - I later learnt these were responses to unidentified food intolerances, notably yeast and wheat). However, to buffer these and strengthen my immune system at different points I have used the following herbs:

• Elder (*Sambucus nigra*) – My initial viral infection that I couldn't kick even after two months was finally knocked on the head with six weeks of taking Elderberry tincture. I have since used Elderberry 'syrup' (a sugar-free version) to contend with more minor viral and post-viral exposure.

• Garlic (*Allium sativum*) – see the supplements section. Garlic is a wonder plant and I've tried to integrate it into my diet as much as possible. It is a fierce

anti-bacterial.

• Echinacea Root Tincture (*Echinacea spp.*) – Oh Echinacea, so commodified yet such a valuable, amazing plant. It's helped me overcome multiple infections when I've needed it and given immune system support.

• Thyme tea (*Thymus vulgaris*) – Fresh thyme in hot water really helped me to clear my initial bacterial infection and recover from living in a damp room for a long time.

• Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) – is very strengthening when contending with a fever, amongst its other amazing actions.

Liver Support

Liver pains have felt a semi-regular occurrence when processing all the nasty painkillers and dealing with the emotional stress of having your life turned upside down. This organ is just so essential to healing on every level. Inflammation indicates the oxidation and elimination of morbid or pathogenic material, hence why the liver is such an important organ in addressing chronic inflammation. A congested liver can also be a factor in pre-menstrual challenges. I have often needed to nourish my liver with:

• Liver tonic – I made a tincture based liver tonic with Dandelion Root (*Taraxacum officinale*) and Yellow Dock Root (*Rumex Crispus*).

• Milk Thistle extract (*Silybum marianum*) – shop-bought but such a powerful aid that would settle down liver pain in a number of hours.

• Dandelion leaf – Adding a few dandelion leaves to green smoothies is definitely fast access to nutrients.

(Please note if you experience liver pain you really, really need to see a doctor ASAP!).

Supplements

Magnesium – Oh magnesium, it seems I am forever deficient in you! In this period, I have learned how linked magnesium deficiency is to pain and depression. To address these deficiencies I have been:

• Taking magnesium citrate

• Taking magnesium malate

• Using magnesium spray

• Having epsom salts baths (my favourite)

• Silica – Silica is essential for cartilage repair. Like completely, utterly

essential. I ordered VitaSil Organic Silicium bio-activated Liquid 500ml online and once again, found myself on an upward curve after its consumption.

• Iron – I have been using Floradix as a way to increase my iron intake, in addition to improvements in my diet.

• B Vitamins – These are super useful for almost every area of health in their support for cellular energy production.

• Vitamin C – I didn't think I could be deficient in this but for sure, I was. It's useful for so many functions of the body and more important than ever when you're trying to support yourself to recover without constantly being knocked back by infections, viruses etc.

• Vitamin D3 – My winter travels and winter stress combined with soggy old England definitely rinsed me of all my vitamin D reserves. Vitamin D is essential for bone repair.

• Kyolic garlic – When I was super ill, an evening faffing around cutting up garlic felt like an effort, so I started taking these supplements to help address fungal infections.

• Vitamin A – Vitamin A is essential for many reasons, including your neural functions and immune system (note that there are risks with having too much – as always, talk to someone before taking things).

• Vitamin B12 – I have been vegan 17 years and only started supplementing with B12 six years ago. Seriously, vegan friends, it is completely essential.

• Probiotics – With so much inflammation linked to the gut, it was clear to me I had to nourish all the little things in there. While touring and desperate I'd taken antibiotics and thus knocked out all the necessary bacteria I need to stay well. Supplementing daily with probiotics gave me a bit more resilience.

• Chromium – I used Viridian GFT chromium complex. Chromium is an essential trace mineral useful for muscle repair amongst other things.

• Glucosamine – I bought Glucosamine HCL vegetarian formula from Higher Nature online because of it being recommended for maintaining healthy joint cartilage. Likewise, it is super difficult to get this as a vegan.

• Higher Nature Thyroid Support Formula with iodine and selenium – At the beginning of the year my thyroid was not functioning well and this supplement was recommended to me to address it.

• Sea Kelp – Likewise, to support my thyroid, sea kelp is a natural source of iodine. I can't help but really not like the taste of seaweed so supplementing felt like the best option.

• Calcium, magnesium and zinc powder (Viridian) – Calcium, magnesium, and zinc are all necessary for muscle and connective tissue repair.

• MSM powder – MSM (methylsulfonylmethane) has been identified in research to be an important building block of healthy bones and joints, reducing joint pain and swelling.

• Serrapeptase – Is a proteolytic enzyme (an enzyme that breaks down protein) – you can get vegan supplements. It helps to reduce inflammation and pain.

Nutrition

I ordered an e-book called Natural Anti-Inflammatory Remedies by Carmen Reeves. The author describes how any illness or discomfort caused by the presence of bacteria, viruses, fungi, parasites and other pesky pathogens can lead to the inflammatory response.

They recommend these foods to avoid:

• Animal products (Please note it is well known that certain animal proteins will aid gut repair faster, however, it is not impossible to rebuild your gut lining or your resilience with a vegan diet, it just takes more planning and intelligence).

• Corn syrup and high fructose corn syrup

• Processed food

• Fried foods

• Gluten products esp. processed baked goods

• Bad fats

• Refined sugars

They emphasised these foods:

• Foods high in omega 3 fatty acids – such as flaxseed, walnuts, almonds, olives, coconut products and nuts.

• Foods high in antioxidants – such as green kale, broccoli, purple potatoes, cabbage, blueberries, raspberries, cherries, red/black/pinto beans, apples, dark chocolate.

• Foods high in fibre including legumes, fruits, root veg and greens. Plus grains such as quinoa, amaranth, sorghum and buckwheat.

• Key anti-inflammatory foods – including plants from the brassica family –

kales, cabbage, radishes, turnips, mustard greens, cauliflower as well as alliums – leeks, garlic, onions, chives etc.

• Anti-inflammatory herbs including cloves, ginger, rosemary, turmeric, black pepper, chamomile, cardamom, coriander, basil, cinnamon, garlic, fennel, parsley and nutmeg.

Other key foods include:

• Soya lecithin – Phosphatidyl choline from lecithin nourishes the nerve endings (myelin) and also supports the liver/gallbladder. I added soya lecithin to smoothies.

• Flaxseed Oil – I took this very intensively at the start, to support with my omega 3 deficiency (which has been proved to be linked to inflammatory processes). It needs to be cold pressed and kept in the fridge.

NB - many months after this blog was written, I had some blood tests (IgE) for food intolerances. While there are many criticisms of these tests, and many false results are reported, it helped me massively to identify the actual food intolerance triggers of my rib pain. Militantly cutting out wheat and yeast stopped 95% of my flare ups, and looking back I realised many bad episodes were after eating certain foods containing these ingredients which I would have never considered (like fermented foods or even soya sauce). This whole period has inspired me to study herbal medicine at a clinical level, as so much of my pain could have been prevented with certain protocols.

Last Words

My other advice is checking your environment is not mouldy or damp. This can obviously lead to chronic respiratory and other fungal infections. I know what it is like growing up in shit houses with damp rooms and abusive landlords. All I can recommend is getting in touch with local housing groups or Solidarity Networks to confront these landlords collectively!

And finally, don't laugh but my friends would call me out if I didn't include this. Sex seemed to be the best therapy. Not at the start, when the pain was so intense I could barely move, but slowly as the months passed and pain decreased, letting a bit of love into my life definitely seemed to be the most healing thing of all. A mixture of releasing tension, stretching and all those feel good hormones have definitely triggered a healing response. Oh, and feeling

loved and supported – friends and lovers being the best therapy of all.

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15

ORGANISING WITH A CHRONIC ILLNESS

The following two chapters were written after of a call-out for contributions from people who had experience of organising and participating in social struggles with a chronic illness.

Thank you again to everyone that has contributed. I have aimed to weave in as many words of other people as possible. Some people wish to be anonymous and I have used fake names with an asterisk while for others I have used their first names. Others are nameless and are simply integrated into the text without direct quotes.

There was so much material, this blog is in two parts. Part one, how it feels. Part two, what we can do to not leave people behind. Please note this blog focuses more on people's negative/harmful experiences, part two focuses on inspiring examples of when people have felt supported and what we can do differently.

Introduction – Dismantling my ableist worldview

I have a lot of experience supporting partners, friends and family members with varying different illnesses, from bipolar, clinical depression and other mental health challenges, to chronic fatigue, being wheelchair bound and more. I've supported mates survive cancer and I've helped people I love leave this world.

But until this year, I've never really been chronically ill. Colds, viruses, an appendix out and broken bones. But never a grinding long term illness, or the sense of despair that it evokes. Folks that have been reading my blog will know that I care a lot about radical honesty. And in this honesty, it is important to say that until this year I had no real understanding at all what my mates were really

going through. I'd attend gatherings like Earth First! or Reclaim the Fields, and never be phased by camping or walking miles across rough ground. Late nights, early starts, long journeys, chronic stress – I felt like I could buffer it, almost thrive in it. I judged others for not keeping up with the pace. (Check out my When did I get so mean? chapter). I was totally and utterly stuck in an ableist perspective of the world. The normative body was my own – white, slim, ableness. All other experiences involved a more intelllectual kind of empathy, and in some ways a learned political performance (where I was always in the support role).

This blog, therefore, is about how it feels to be experiencing a chronic illness while being involved in social struggles. An inquiry into people's experiences of illnesses developed through burnout or trauma and in relationship to engagement in movements, campaigns, organisations and collectives.

Deadwood?

What was upsetting about the emails I received was not so much the debilitation, pain and distress caused by actual illnesses – but the attitudes, reactions and lack of support in response from people identified as comrades and close friends.

Lyn is an incredible organiser who I have looked up to since I was a kid. Involved in SHAC (Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty) from day one, Lyn was brutally assaulted at the beginning of the campaign at an action blocking the A1 near Huntingdon Life Sciences. Pulled off a tripod more than 20ft high by police, Lyn was hospitalised with a broken leg, had more than 5 hours of surgery and experienced multiple complications. She was in a wheelchair for months and has had an array of after-effects, including PTSD and continuing chronic pain. Now Lyn has mild scoliosis, dizzy spells, permanent scarring, episodes where she can barely move (diagnosed as ME) and bursitis in her right hip after years of overcompensating for the left.

While Lyn's story is a blog post (or book) in itself, I wanted to highlight some of the feelings she has experienced when still being heavily involved in the animal liberation movement with a disability, chronic illness and the aftermath of psycho-emotional health effects post-trauma. In terms of what has been traumatic, Lyn described some of the behaviour she has witnessed and been subjected to:

"Denial, ignoring it as though it hasn't happened or is not in any way relevant to the campaign. Not being involved in decision making on how this should have been handled. The attitude that anything bad that happens during

activism should be brushed under the carpet as to not put the "new people" off. The attitude that it is "weak", "negative", "harmful to the campaign" to cry or try and talk about what happened. The idea that there are those who make decisions and those who have to go along with those decisions, and an expectation that activists should do as they are told by other activists. It being intimated that I was not doing enough post being injured or when I have had periods of being unwell. Being told by some individuals that I let the side down by having a blood transfusion, anesthetics, and antibiotics which I would have died without. Some arbitrary cutoff recovery period by made by others.

Very little support long term, something cited by many activists whether they have been imprisoned, seriously injured, psycho-emotionally damaged by activism or all three. The term "deadwood" being used to describe those who have pushed themselves to exhaustion. Telling other activists that my injuries were minimal so that there would be no "negativity". Being told that I play being a victim."

Lyn's words were painful to read, because SHAC, and the wider animal liberation movement, were my lifeblood for so many years. I was brought up in the movement, these people were my elders. I feel like I have spent the last 5 years since prison trying to unlearn all the harmful, abusive, problematic stuff I soaked up like a sponge during those years. (Don't get me wrong, I also learned a lot of amazing things, and the movement was an antidote to equally shitty things in life). I am desperate to work for animal liberation but feel little affinity or safety any more engaged in struggles where experiences like these are endemic. I believe the movement has failed the animals, not because we didn't work hard enough, but because we failed each other – we didn't support each other during the repression, we didn't look behind us when people burnt out. We lost hundreds of amazing people and their time, energy and passion because the work of caring for each other was not valued. No fucking more, ever again.

There is no binary between what gets called physical and mental/ psycho-emotional health

There is obviously a brutal binary that capitalism cultivates, that somehow what gets called our mental or psycho-emotional and physical health are separate. I was expecting lots of emails about people's "physical" health issues, but in fact, more and more were around social anxiety and feelings of depression.

The challenges that were highlighted included just how much it can affect someone who is struggling with their mental health to hear 'relentless negativity'

and unending criticalness of each other and the tactics of different groups. Obviously critique is completely essential to learning, however, the effects of people slagging each other off, criticising and belittling others are draining and harmful, and can aggravate folks struggling with their psycho-emotional health beyond what we may know.

Likewise for those who experience social anxiety, trying to organise with people who dominate meetings or who are 'extremely grumpy and who take their anger out on everyone around them unwarrantedly' is really difficult, says Helen*. For a fellow comrade with experiences diagnosed as bipolar, they wrote how inflexibility is damaging. (In part two I talk more about how the way that organisations are structured can radically alter the feelings for people experiencing illnesses). Once again, organising with anxiety and/or depression is a blog post in itself, and one that I definitely don't feel qualified to write.

Illness = Weakness?

The reproduction of that worldview that illness = weakness that our society perpetuates is a recurring theme in all of the contributions. Ali* told me, "Within movements, we seem to have fostered a culture of 'illness = weakness'; showing that any signs of vulnerability are frowned upon, and we have to present ourselves as eternally strong warriors that feel nothing of the repercussions or draining effects of activism. As a result, we have ended up encouraging completely unhealthy, unrealistic, unsustainable and damaging way of campaigning and living; ways that actually write off long-standing campaigners or cause people to drop off the radar entirely. And how many times have we all heard about 'burnout'?

This is not a simple byproduct of campaigning, but a direct result of our own attitudes as a movement and lack of understanding for how we exist and organise within various struggles… Illness is not a weakness. Feeling upset, feeling tired, feeling unwell are not anything to be looked down upon; it doesn't make you less of an effective activist. What affects efficacy will be how we deal with these issues and how we manage our workloads."

What is clear for folks with chronic illnesses is that a large source of anxiety is worrying what people think of them. For example, Helen* says people act like if you don't go to X event, you don't care about the issue. There is unending worry that they will be perceived as uncaring, uncommitted and apathetic simply because they can not be physically present at meetings and actions. Fears of being perceived as 'lazy' are frequent, even when they believe their comrades

are 'right-on', have a good understanding of these issues or even illnesses themselves.

Am I a burden?

All the challenges we experience when organising – fear, stress, pressures on our relationships – all of these are aggravated by chronic illness. Ali* shares that "Chronic illness can also add to pre-existing feelings of helplessness and vulnerability that people often feel when involved in a struggle. It renders you unable to fight – not for others, and certainly not for yourself. Those feelings can be exaggerated further if fellow comrades are unsympathetic or make you feel bad about not being able to participate in certain activities."

Those that contacted me also shared that they felt like they were 'unwelcome burdens'. They are aware of their often more intense needs and don't want to 'burden people', especially friends and comrades who are busy organisers. I have definitely felt unable at times to reach out to close friends that are comrades because I know how much pressure they are under. I have felt embarrassed and ashamed at times for needing to take a step back, for needing to admit I can't do something or that I need support. For example, right now with my ribs, I can't even carry a rucksack, for months I couldn't even lift my laptop for fear of a flare up. I'd have to bashfully ask mates or mum to carry these things for me, and while only a small thing, these experiences, if not responded to with kindness and care, compound the feelings that you are useless, pathetic and needy. You hate yourself for 'putting' on people.

Fatigue and limited energy

Overwhelming contributions were those about fatigue. One person wrote that "disabilities that involve severe fatigue mean you have to ration your energy extremely carefully, often even for "small" things like going to the supermarket or having a meal with your housemates. Sometimes people, including activists, really don't understand this at all and think that just because something is easy, even trivial, for them to do doesn't mean I can necessarily do it right now. I can very rarely be spontaneous, and unexpected things can throw out my entire day or week. It's not just a tiredness thing: when I run out of energy I completely lose the ability to communicate with most people and to complete basic tasks, and have to hide in my room until my energy comes back."

When I was first sick with my costochondritis, I could maybe manage an hour a day of work before needing to lie down again. It meant I had to brutally

ration my energy and therefore totally limit my involvement in all the collectives that had been the backbone of my life. And unfortunately, in capitalism, that energy must often first go to earning money so we don't go under. For those with little practical support it might be making themselves one meal a day uses all the energy they have.

Feeling left behind

When needing to take breaks, at whatever timescales, people feel disconnected. And sometimes even punished for not being available or present. Involvement in a struggle is generative of relationships, connections and time with people you feel an affinity with. If illness = absence, then you lose a lot, sometimes even all of these relationships.

The most visible impulse in all of the contributions I read was that, more than anything, people do not want to be left behind. There is an overwhelming desire for people to be involved, to resist, to fight, to struggle. Sam* wrote, "Please don't just avoid us and find somebody else to fill the gap we left, like we were only ever important as another body in the physical actions and resistance."

Living with a chronic illness IS revolutionary struggle

This next section could be a blog in itself. I wanted to end with an important point that was contributed by Aaron, a comrade of mine who shared their feelings from their years of experiences diagnosed as bipolar, and epilepsy:

"When I consider what "struggle" in a social, economic and political sense actually means, for myself at least, I begin from this quote from Raoul Vaneigem:

"People who talk about revolution and class struggle without referring explicitly to everyday life, without understanding what is subversive about love and what is positive in the refusal of constraints, such people have a corpse in their mouth."

For many years, bipolar disorder and epilepsy have determined the form of my struggles. Remembering to eat, sleep, wash, go shopping, do the laundry, vacuum the floor, clean the kitchen and do the washing up or just, even after remembering, gathering energy to do at least one of them. Then, the flipside - having too much energy and being reckless, arguing and fighting strangers, spending money that's not even mine, trying not to lose too many friends. On top of this, worrying that I may have a seizure and walk into a main road, again. But I have to live my life and it has been the drive to go beyond the everyday

constraints thrust upon me by poor health that has brought me in to direct conflict with the crippling insanity of capitalist social relations.

How I've chosen to struggle against this has also been defined, not just by the current state of revolutionary and radical social struggles but the form they've taken. My ability to participate in particular struggles is fundamentally down to how they are organised, how much this organisational practice enables me to participate."

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HOW TO NOT LEAVE PEOPLE BEHIND

This is part two, focusing on how it feels to live with a chronic illness and struggle for social change.

A group of friends and strangers responded to my call out and shared with me their experiences. This blog post aims to summarise some of the "best practice" and positive experiences they have had, with the hope that more of us in different groups and collectives will make these a reality so we no longer leave people behind.

90% of these words are not my own, for ease of reading I didn't quote everyone individually but have occasionally added quotes to give more concrete examples. To share this, I have to revert back to my shameless love of bullet points:

• Check in with people. Ask how they are feeling. Especially after ATOS assessments (an assessment for capacity to work) or in times of crisis.

• Recognise that breaks from campaigning and organising are necessary.

• Take it at face value when someone says they cannot do something – as Sarah* says "Disrespecting the right of people of with disabilities to judge for themselves what they can and can't do is what the government and the DWP does, and is against the principle of anarchist self-determination!" (DWP - Department of Work and Pensions).

• Be aware of 'relentless negativity' and how this affects peoples' energy and well-being (especially if they have very limited energy, such as someone with CFS - chronic fatigue syndrome).

• Do not pathologise or dehumanise people. Sarah* wrote, "When I've had

a panic attack or looked extremely anxious, it helped when people acted like I'm just a human who is having a health problem, rather than looking at me like I'm a massive weirdo they don't know how to interact with."

• Do not measure attendance at actions/events as an indicator of care or commitment when there are so many barriers and reasons why people cannot participate.

• Stay connected with folks that are having a break from organising – who when they need to step back will often feel disconnected and alone.

• Stop using ableist language and start calling out people that do.

• Be understanding of the variability of someone's feelings and capacity. Sarah emphasised that "The main thing I want people to understand is the variable nature of disability. That sometimes you can do something one day, but that doesn't mean you can do it regularly or reliably." This is definitely one of the main things I've tried to check myself on – I regularly judged friends that would cancel on me one minute, but then appear pretty energetic and pain-free the next day. This is simply how illness rolls sometimes.

• Understand that people with disabilities or chronic illnesses have to ration their energy extremely carefully.

• Respond to calls for help.

• Don't assume what is 'normal' to you is 'normal' to others. Especially when it comes to repression. Jo* wrote that " I want people to know that activism contributed to my breakdown because I am a straightforward and sensitive person who had never, for example, been mistreated by the police before. I needed more support when that happened to me, but old-hat activists just take it in their stride and expect you to do the same."

• Check in with people not only immediately after actions, demos, events and so forth, but over the longer term when they are more likely to be dealing with depression, anxiety and burnout.

• Work together so people can participate in other ways if they want or are able to.

• Keep people updated and in the loop.

• Ask for people's opinions even if they can't make it and respect that sometimes, they will not be able to give input or respond.

• Do not treat people like they are disposable.

• If a comrade has a chronic illness, take the time to learn about it. Don't make presumptions about how they must feel; illness is very subjective and

unique to everyone. Knowing more about a particular illness will help you understand their needs and limitations.

• While research and self-education are important, be cautious to avoid making ignorant, condescending and outright offensive statements (because this is a common experience for people who wrote to me).

• Encourage healthy lifestyle choices and decisions and try not to enable ones you know will contribute to a friend's illness. Of course with that kind of encouragement it's good to acknowledge that it can be complex/difficult for all of us to make changes, and that we need to support each other in those processes.

• Share experiences but do not make out that it's the "same" for you.

• If someone has limited energy, then small things make a difference so that they can better contribute in terms of political organising. For example, lifts, making them meals, helping with washing up and so forth. These 'energy savers' for them mean they can actually use their energy for something they really want to be doing.

These points emerged in terms of how we design and structure our groups and organisations:

• Design in back-ups, or people that can step up if folks are not able to follow through on their actions because of their illness.

• Create horizontally-structured ways of organising that equally distribute work/responsibility/pressure/stress, rather than having larger portions resting on a few people.

• If certain practices are inaccessible in organisations (and are to the detriment of individuals, most likely those with mental or physical health challenges), then members of the organisation as a whole should come up with solutions (not just those that are affected).

• Prioritise personal development and collaborative problem solving in regards to accessibility. One comrade wrote to me saying that, "I've especially noticed this recently as I've become more involved with the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World - a radical union); that personal development and collaborative problem solving in regards to accessibility in both the physical and mental sense only further enables participation, which in turn consistently improves the welfare of all involved, creating a powerful force for radical change."

• Commit to making organisations adaptive and responsive.

• Clear policies and procedures can really help. Aaron shared with me how, "It's not a contradiction for left libertarians to develop and define practical rules and agreed on approaches to accountability. In fact, the lack of such things has destroyed social movements, left many victims of abuse isolated, allowed people to sabotage such movements and the list goes on. It's a hypocrisy, and not a noble one, to have such strong opinions on the cruelty of our society and all its institutions, yet abandon the vulnerable within our own organisations and social circles."

Many key points also emerged for folks with illnesses:

Advice from Laura*:

• Identify your body's own warning signals – how does it feel when you start to become ill or feel unwell?

• Stop and rest when you get a warning signal. Stop while you still feel good.

• Know your own limitations, and don't be afraid to let others know.

• If someone else informs you of their limitations, respect it – don't question it or make presumptions. We should encourage each other.

• Know your own needs, and aim to make sure they're met. What do you need to be happy, healthy? If you have a chronic illness, what do you need to prevent a relapse?

• Rest regularly. How often do we really sit or lie down and do nothing? No screens, no books, no distractions? As people, we have a tendency to always have a need to be doing something. It's really important that during the day we have moments where we simply rest. It makes a really big difference.

• Plan your days/weeks/time/activities carefully. How long do you need for a certain project or campaign? Is it feasible to do in that time? If it is a lot of work, can you reach out to ask someone else to assist? If it is unfeasible, what would it cost your health to still do it? Spread out major events or workloads, leaving time for resting and activities that add something positive, either mentally or physically, and do not increase tiredness or trigger illness.

• If you are feeling under the weather, don't be afraid to accept offered help!

Other things that emerged included:

• If you think there is a risk you may not be able to complete tasks, articulating this is really important. Hannah* wrote to me saying, "You have a personal responsibility not to take too much on, then expect others to take the flack when you can't follow through, so I try not to commit to anything I can't pick up and put down straight away…In the past, I've had people take on projects then dump them on me because they are too ill to follow through, even though they knew I was ill as well, which I found stressful."

• There is a need for you to communicate as confidently as you can your own needs and expectations. Hannah* emphasised that "You have to find ways to do things to get involved that work for you, and it's really important that you communicate your needs without expecting others to automatically anticipate them."

I end with a quote from a close friend, who has been an incredible support for me while getting ill (who has seven years experience more than me):

"***We need to start building movements centred around sustainable, long-lasting, healthy and regenerative tactics and habits – and create an environment in which illness is not something that is hidden away or shrouded in shame, but one where someone can feel they will be cared for and supported…***

We need to build movements based on resilience, and one of the keys to that is a long term, thoughtful, positive approach to our health and well-being, and creating an environment where people feel comfortable expressing vulnerabilities, asking for help, and learning to work within our own limitations."

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FEAR

Since my best friend in prison was diagnosed with cancer I feel like I've been in an emotional incinerator. I've felt so knocked sideways that most of the time I can't even work out what I'm feeling. Yet, when I sat with my thoughts late one night with some stillness from the day, I realised I am just completely, utterly and full-bodily overwhelmed with fear.

> **FEAR NOT JUST THAT SHE WILL DIE, BUT THAT SHE'D DIE IN SO MUCH PAIN, THAT SHE'D CHANGE FROM THE INCREDIBLE ANARCHIST PUNK ONCE-IN-A-MILLION PERSON TO SOMEONE LIFELESS, THAT THE NEXT FEW MONTHS I WILL HAVE TO BEAR WITNESS TO THIS CHANGE AND BE POWERLESS TO HELP.**

Fear that the prison will block my attempts to support her and that I won't have the energy to fight them. Fear that her partner who is an IPP in prison will kill themselves from the grief. Fear that I will forever live with a sense of failure of not getting them free. Fear of my life falling apart, descending into chaos. Fear of the rage I will feel and what that could make me do. Being all too familiar with grief, holding a fear of if I feel all those feelings again I don't know if I will survive.

Being able to identify and articulate these fears hasn't taken them away, but it has meant I feel familiar with them, I can feel what is happening with my body when I'm heavy with sadness. Observing my own fear has meant I can begin to support myself better during this time.

These feelings have been generative of reflection and reading, and the intention of this post, therefore, is to explore fear in relationship to struggle, burnout, and recovery.

When I think of fear, I always think of this hardcore band called Stay Gold. I listen to them when experiencing angst in relationships. Their powerful emotionally expressive music makes me access certain feelings that I'm often repressing. Sometimes I'll only even notice my heartache because I've unconsciously started to listen to them in my headphones. In their track 'On the homefront', there are a couple of lines that return to me often:

"I'm not strong enough to hold on to this. Only cowards make their choices out of fear. I'm not smart enough to hold on to you. I guess it's just my luck, couldn't we have met next year?"

For someone with a simultaneous fear of commitment, and fear of abandonment, these lyrics pack a punch. But it's the 'no choices of out fear' phrase that comes up for me so much when making decisions. Oftentimes, when I'm scared or confused, I ask myself am I making this choice out of fear? Am I avoiding falling for someone, because I don't want to be hurt? Am I avoiding undertaking a certain course of action, because I'm scared of prison? I try to listen to my body and get to the root of that fear because I never want to be ruled by it.

My best friend Gilly who died in 2015 was perhaps one of the most fearless people I've ever met. Growing up with her as a role model, she seemed completely fearless. She was the most unrelenting ALF activist I'd ever encountered, seemingly unafraid of returning to prison, bold and brash and not scared of violence or injury or any repercussions of living on the front lines her whole life. My growing-up intertwined with her reduction in capacity. I came to witness the effects of this particular fearless life – the impacts of smoking, poor nutrition, lack of sleep, prison, and poverty. Her life was dramatically cut short (yet she was at peace with that, and you can tell she knew she had lived ten lifetimes in one and was happy with her lot).

But as I came of age, I couldn't help thinking, maybe if she had been more afraid she would have made different choices and she might still be with me today. For example, it is my fear of poverty that made me invest so many hours of my life into starting a workers co-op and developing a livelihood that could sustain me as an organiser long term. It is my fear of cancer that stopped me from smoking. And now, recovering from my illness, it is ultimately my fear of a relapse that moderates my behaviour more than anything else. Yes, I've learned

lots of groovy nourishing self-care tools, but actually it's my fear of pain and fear of further disruption in my life, that is the biggest factor in my decision making.

For me, what encapsulates my period of burnout more than any other emotion is fear and its balance in my life. When I was in this grim spiral last winter, hallucinating from exhaustion, emotionally turbulent in the extreme… the scales between fear (rational and irrational) and more grounded decision making or stable feelings were pretty far tipped. I felt full of fear. I awoke with a sense of fear in my stomach each morning. Fear that I was getting sick, losing my marbles or burning out. Fear that the State were going to build all these new mega-prisons and I had zero capacity to organise. Fear that we would totally, utterly fail to stop them. Fear that I'd never have a long-lasting relationship, fear that I was unloveable, fear that everyone I ever loved would eventually leave me high and dry. Fear that my friends would die in prison. Fear that my future felt like a big black hole of resistance, repression, and survival, while trying to not let the trauma of it all eat me alive.

My months of chronic pain and interactions with the medical industrial complex brought me more fears. Fears of pneumonia, blood clots, bone cancer. Fears of 'malfunctions' with my heart or lungs. Fears that I would never get better.

Miriam Greenspan, who wrote the book 'Healing through the dark emotions. The wisdom of grief, fear, and despair' (that I really recommend reading) writes how:

"Fear arises in any situation where there is a threat of loss or harm to the body, mind, and spirit. It is a basic emotion, built into the biological organism. Part of our deepest instinct for survival, fear is our emotional alarm system." She continues, "What fear tells us is that something requires immediate and close attention" [1]

If I hadn't been so scared I wouldn't get better, it's unlikely I would have researched everything under the sun that could potentially help. If I hadn't been so concerned about my well-being, I probably wouldn't be blogging or doing any emotional nitty gritty work at all. Fear has been a big mirror in front of me telling me to sort my life out before more harm comes my way. Fear has been my friend, and for this reason, I encourage other people to not suppress these feelings. What are your fears telling you?

Our oppressive gendered culture often determines the way we are socialised to interact with our fear. There is conquering and carrying, and everything in

between. Miriam describes how "The culture of patriarchy punishes fearful men and fearless women."

Growing up in the pretty macho animal liberation movement, it was clear how culturally pervasive it was to not [appear] to be frightened of prison. Yet for something allegedly not scary as an experience, we never asked ourselves why so few people returned to the movement post-prison. We failed to have conversations about our fears, at least in public. I was fortunate that my friendships with prisoners introduced me to the reality of these experiences, rather than what was published in support group newsletters. Yet I still didn't tell people I was afraid. The day I had my bail revoked to start my prison sentence, I told everyone I wanted to go alone to court. In my head, this was based on not wanting to upset anyone, but actually, on reflection, I think it's because if no one was there then no one had to bear witness to my fear.

Miriam encourages us to "Think of fear not as a weakness but as information, a signal of unsafety, a useable energy, and a way of knowing."

So right now, when I wake up, and I feel fear in the pit of my stomach about Sam dying, I acknowledge my fear. Because it's this fear that is motivating me to stay on top of HMP and fight any neglect or poor treatment she is subjected to. It is this fear that means I love her fully and passionately, aware these may be my last months with her. And it is this fear that fuels my rage and power as an organiser to try to dismantle the prison system. So thank you, fear, for everything you bring to my life. I am not weak because I feel you, I am stronger because I hear you and I act.

My call to us all, therefore, is to think deeply (or more so, feel deeply) our fears. Talk about them in our groups. See how we can use this feedback and guidance to improve our lives, make our movements more resilient and ultimately more effective in destroying the systems that thrive on fear and their very real power over us.

Miriam writes how in these times:

"Our fears are rational, largely transpersonal, and overwhelming. They are also largely denied. In this unprecedented world context, fear is continually triggered and benumbed. Isolated in our own skins, without a community in which our fears can be shared, validated, and addressed, the authentic experience of fear in our time has become almost impossible."

Even though in our society where there is a definite divide between the daily fears of oppressed groups (being deported, being targeted by the police, being attacked for being trans etc.) and those with different layers of privilege, fear ultimately is a universal experience. Miriam says that "Almost any phobia or fear you can name, at its core, gets down to these six: fear of pain, loss, death, vulnerability, isolation, and chaos."

When people in our groups and collectives are coming from such diverse backgrounds, talking about our fears together (and explicitly looking at how race, class, gender, age, health etc. intersect with these) could be really powerful and generative of new ways of interacting with each other. If we can share fears, validate them and address them collectively, imagine the strength we could find to transform our lives.

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1. Healing Through the Dark Emotions: The Wisdom of Grief, Fear, and Despair, Miriam Greenspan

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THIS SHIT IS VICARIOUS

In this blog, I want to write about something I've been researching a lot recently called vicarious trauma, because I feel it is super relevant to social struggles. For most of us, we attempt to intervene in situations, acute and chronic, that are stressful and traumatic, depressing and debilitating. From visiting prisons and detention centres to investigating and exposing factory farms, listening to stories of abuse and rape, defending ourselves against violent hunt supporters to addressing fascist street violence. We both see and experience a lot of messed up shit. How does this stuff affect us long term? And why are we not talking about it?

In my reading, I came across a home-study module in vicarious trauma by an organisation called the Headington Institute who work with humanitarian workers worldwide. They describe vicarious trauma (VT) as, "the process of change that happens because you care about other people that have been hurt, and feel committed or responsible to help them. Over time this process can lead to changes in your psychological, physical and spiritual well-being." [1]

A lot of trauma-related texts refer to one-off traumatic incidents. Increasingly, trauma conversation and writing acknowledges the effects of long term and complex trauma, which overlaps with the effect of all this gnarly sounding stuff on us over time. It shines a light on the potential cumulative consequences of bringing other people's grief, fear, anger, and despair into our own awareness and experience over a longer period of time.

So how does vicarious trauma affect you and other people? What are the signs?

For this section, I've directly copied from the manual (which you can download for free online). I've put my own comments in these brackets [].

Physical and physiological signs

• Hyperarousal symptoms (e.g. nightmares, difficulty concentrating, being easily startled, sleep difficulties)

• Repeated thoughts or images regarding traumatic events, especially when you are trying not to think about it

• Feeling numb

• Feeling unable to tolerate strong emotions

• Increased sensitivity to violence

• Cynicism

• Generalised despair and hopelessness, and loss of idealism

• Guilt regarding your own survival and/or pleasure

• Anger

• Disgust

• Fear

Changes in Worldview and Frame of Reference

• Changes in spirituality (e.g. changes in beliefs regarding meaning, purpose, causality, connection, hope, and faith). This often takes the form of questioning prior beliefs and the meaning and purpose in life. In turn, this can be connected to a sense of loss of purpose, hopelessness, and cynicism. [Perhaps the grumpy older anarchists we all complain about are actually just vicariously traumatised?! For me this section also flags up how our political worldviews and beliefs may change over time too in response to the ongoing trauma we witness].

• Changes in identity (e.g. changes in the way you practice or think about important identities as a professional, friend, or family member). You could, for example, find that most of your time and energy is spent in your professional role because you feel disconnected from or uncomfortable in your other roles or identities. [Substitute professional for activist/anarchist/organiser/whatever label and you can see how uncomfortable it can become to engage in different roles].

• Changes in beliefs related to major psychological needs (e.g. beliefs regarding safety, control, trust, esteem, and intimacy). For example, changes in

how vulnerable you believe you, and others that you care about, are to harm. In turn, these beliefs can influence your thoughts (e.g. worrying about safety issues, mistrust of strangers) and actions (e.g. being more protective of your children).

Behaviour and relationship signs

[This section basically describes my relationships over the last decade – sorry exes]

- Difficulty setting boundaries and separating work from personal life
- Feeling like you never have time or energy for yourself
- Feeling disconnected from loved ones, even when communicating with them
- Increased conflict in relationships
- General social withdrawal
- Acting out/exhibiting the "silencing response" – finding yourself unable to pay attention to other's distressing stories because they seem overwhelming and incomprehensible, and directing people to talk about less distressing material
- Decreased interest in activities that used to bring pleasure, enjoyment, or relaxation
- Irritable, intolerant, agitated, impatient, needy, and/or moody
- Increased dependencies or addictions involving nicotine, alcohol, food, sex, shopping, internet, and/or other substances
- Sexual difficulties
- Impulsivity

Other than being absolutely miserable, vicarious trauma also greatly impacts our work. We may make bad decisions, commit to too much, put other people at risk, be unable to fulfil commitments, be trapped in a burn out cycle and then need unplanned time off, blame others and struggle to collaborate or be 'wet tea towels' in our groups because of our own cynicism, depression or lack of motivation.

The Headington Institute training module flags up all kinds of risk factors including personality and coping styles, personal history, current life circumstances, social support, work styles, the situation and cultural context of what you are doing and with whom. So using myself as an example, you see

this confluence of factors: an avoidant emotional coping style, stoic workaholic personality, a lifetime of hyper-responsibility and caring for others and trying to work and organise while dealing with chronic stress in other areas of my life (e.g. supporting my friends in prison, a precarious income and an overwhelming number of bereavements in recent years). You take any of these risk factors away and you can see how the risk of vicarious trauma may be reduced (for example all of the above are pretty well buffered by the huge support network I've gained through my involvement in various social struggles).

The situational contexts highlighted as being high risk include: working directly with people in need, hearing/witnessing distressing stories, scenes, and events, being in positions of responsibility without adequate support and resources, people reacting and interacting in abusive ways and inadequate rest inbetween 'assignments'. I don't know about you reading this, but for me, this pretty much describes most frontline grassroots struggles.

Therefore, in my opinion, we have to take vicarious trauma seriously.

Individually coping with and transforming vicarious trauma

The guide I read suggests the key ways of coping with and transforming vicarious trauma are awareness, balance, and connection. Coping may involve escaping (time off, books, movies etc.), resting, and playing (doing fun things, physical activity etc.). Transforming these feelings may require identifying ways to nurture a sense of meaning and hope. For me this means going to regular gatherings where I can be inspired by other people, watching old-school movies about successful acts of rebellion and lastly, even just having cheesy inspiring postcards near my desk can help me stay connected to why I'm doing this work.

They also recommend mindfulness (cure for everything right apparently?), mourning our losses and marking transitions (yes, this also means celebrating small victories when we have them) as well as taking more time to reflect. Investing time in ourselves so we grow is a big one too, for example learning a new skill, studying, learning a martial art etc.

Being aware of your own risk factors as well as your own responses and signs is super important too. (There is a neat guide in the handbook). And finally, even though it is hard, trying somehow to find a bit of balance. Even if it is just between less demanding and more challenging work. Connecting with other people, having strong relationships and trying to cultivate a sense of joy, wonder, purpose, hope and meaning in our lives may also keep our hearts beating.

Collective ways of preventing and addressing vicarious trauma

Like all of my blogs, while I question what I can do individually, I know that this work is our collective responsibility. It is up to us to design organisations and collectives with infrastructure that can support us cope with traumatic stuff and sustain us long term.

The training module gives a list of recommendations which are not all easily applicable to more grassroots groups, however I think we should still look to these with awareness and attempts to put some of these factors into practice: adequate salaries and time off, adequate orientations, training, supervision, safety, access to counselling support and medical care, family support (e.g. childcare), working and connecting with each other (e.g. working in teams), peer support networks, voices in decision making, regular check-ins, setting a sustainable pace and valuing people.

Translated into grassroots models this may look like:

• Adequate expenses policies/financial support when appropriate to support people to participate (or even paid work/organiser subs when appropriate)

• Regular time off organising

• Solid introductions to how groups work/how to do things/support for new people

• Training e.g. mentoring, workshops, courses, reading groups, gatherings and skillshares (especially around vicarious trauma and burnout prevention)

• Support and mentoring from others

• Commitment to creating safer spaces (I know that it is a minefield)

• Accessible counselling

• Medical and health support

• Collective models of care for childcare, elder care, supporting people with chronic illnesses etc. (and respite for carers)

• Creating face-to-face time together to work together

• Working collectively especially when shit gets distressing (so we all feel more supported)

• Peer support networks (formal and informal)

• Ensuring appropriate decision making in groups so people feel able to share their feelings, opinions and ideas

• Autonomy – that folk feel control and agency over their own work and

tasks

• Regular check-ins

• A culture where everyone calls each other out/flags up when the pace is unsustainable or potentially harming each other

• Valuing people might involve: challenging multiple and intersecting forms of oppression in groups, supporting people that have experienced abuse or violence, squashing machismo, having support for folks experiencing repression, supporting people that have burnt out etc. Basically not treating each other like we are disposable.

There are probably a million other options.

Ultimately, we are not well paid 'aid workers', humanitarians or social workers with a supervision structure. The suffering we witness and experience is not offset by a monthly salary or career development, an eventual pension or the option to take time out/change careers. This frontline of state violence is our fucking lives. Like I mentioned in my 'when class is a struggle' blog, this is not a game or a lifestyle choice.

If we admit that this is what we are dealing with – first hand and vicarious trauma – on an unending basis, then I ask of us:

• What collective models of support can we create or build upon that can support us to survive and navigate this trauma?

Even though safety is an illusion, and we cannot escape from structural forces of violence and oppression, this question will not stay in the past tense for long…

• How can we do our best to heal from the trauma we have experienced so that we don't lose more of our comrades and loved ones to burnout, illness or premature death?

I went to a workshop last year on 'People's Science', where a close friend of mine, Rafter Sass Ferguson from Liberation Ecology, described People's Science as a culture of experimentation and critical thinking with a call to arms to appropriate the resources of contemporary science and integrate them into our movement [2].

Therefore, I want to start working with folks to explore:

• How can we appropriate useful resources from the fields of trauma therapy?

• How can we better claim useful tools for ourselves, groups, and movements while dismantling oppressive and capitalist models of healthcare and psychotherapy?

• How can we access and use this knowledge to reclaim our own health and recover from trauma while continuing to address the multiple roots of its main causes?

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THE ECOLOGY OF FEELING SHIT

During my peak weeks of feeling absolute shit, I remember saying to my Mum, "I'm sure there is something chemically wrong with my brain". I felt really out of control of how I was feeling and it felt genuinely physiological, like I just couldn't feel better if I tried.

This last year has been a huge learning journey in getting to know my body and the various ecological factors that contribute to rubbish psycho-emotional/mental health. In my blogs I've been trying to explore the societal contributors to burn out – gender, class, dynamics in our groups and movements etc. In this one, I get to express my inner science geek and highlight the ecology of feeling shit – all the biological and ecological factors that can contribute to feeling shit.

These are huge fields of research, so I'm never going to do them justice in a short blog! But here we go…

Also before we get stuck in a couple of disclaimers:

• There are *so* many factors beyond this post.

• Do not use this to self-diagnose, or even worse tell someone why they are feeling the way they are.

• It's just meant to be for information and interest. I am not a health professional! I've tried my best to quote decent references.

• Read the conclusion first which explains that all the below is not going to create healthy people in a world of oppression.

Vitamin and Mineral Deficiencies

It's not just marketing folks. Vitamins and minerals are super essential.

Collapsing into my herbalist's office, I learned I was deficient in vitamin D, A, magnesium, B6, B12, and these were all playing into my emotional volatility. An article in the Current Psychiatry Journal [1] explores mental health and vitamin deficiencies. The snazzy table shows that deficiencies in B6 and B12 can cause depression and B9 can cause 'behavioural disorders'.

I've been vegan 17 years and only started taking B12 about 6 years ago, thanks to some friends starting a website about it. Ever thought a lot of people in the animal liberation movement are genuinely a bit bonkers? Research shows that B12 deficiency can cause depression, irritability, agitation, psychosis, and obsessive symptoms. Some research even indicates patients living with experiences that get called schizophrenia have decreased vitamin C levels and dysfunction of antioxidant defenses [1].

Research has shown that the most common nutritional deficiencies seen in patients with "mental disorders" [my air quotes] are of omega 3 fatty acids, B vitamins, minerals, and amino acids that are precursors to neurotransmitters [2]. Amino acids are super important and to be honest a vegan diet doesn't give you the right mix easily. If these guys aren't synthesising right, our neurotransmitters will be affected and that can generate low mood and aggression (and can actually lead to brain damage). The balance between omega 3 and omega 6 fatty acids can also be a culprit for "disturbance in neural function" [3]. This was a big thing for me when I got sick, and I've been trying to address this with linseed and hemp seed oil, plus algae supplements.

Deficiencies in iron are a key factor too, and can make people prone to depression. A report analysing five different studies showed that zinc, which plays a large role in protecting the brain, is found in lower levels in depressed folks. A study released in 2013 by the Journal of Clinical Nutrition analysed more than 18000 people in the UK and shows that vitamin D deficiencies were consistently present in people suffering from depression and panic disorders.

Obviously, things are aggravated e.g. if you're depressed you're way less likely to spend quality time outside etc. And obviously, depression and other mental health issues cannot be divorced from oppression and poverty. However, I think it's pretty clear that even just deficiencies in one or two nutrients can throw you out and significantly affect your mood.

Most of us don't eat well because we're broke. The nutrients aren't available in our food easily because of industrial agriculture and our shit soils. We get no nutritional education and this stuff is a total minefield. I've taken the wrong supplements at the wrong times with the wrong things and basically made taking

them pointless. Everyone is trying to sell you stuff and it feels like you need a degree in nutrition to make sense of it all. It's a learning process, and a year in, I feel like I can actually notice in myself when I'm deficient in things or what I need.

Gut Flora

So there is this whole incredible field now exploring how our guts affect our psycho-emotional health. An article in the Scientific American summarises where we're at in understanding these connections (sorry there are a couple of grim references to animal testing in it):

"Scientists are increasingly convinced that the vast assemblage of microfauna in our intestines may have a major impact on our state of mind. The gut-brain axis seems to be bidirectional—the brain acts on gastrointestinal and immune functions that help to shape the gut's microbial makeup, and gut microbes make neuroactive compounds, including neurotransmitters and metabolites that also act on the brain. These interactions could occur in various ways: microbial compounds communicate via the vagus nerve, which connects the brain and the digestive tract, and microbially derived metabolites interact with the immune system, which maintains its own communication with the brain" [4].

In plain speak – our brain and guts are connected and influence each other and this can affect our moods.

Laura Sanders writes how "The microbiome churns out the mood-influencing neurotransmitters serotonin, norepinephrine and dopamine. Bacteria can also change how the central nervous system uses these chemicals" [5]. Most people who take anti-depressants know the importance of these neurotransmitters on their mental health, as anti-depressants trigger similar changes.

For folks with chronic gastrointestinal conditions, sometimes they are offered a fecal transplant. Studies have shown this whole new party of microbes can almost transport 'mental disorders' to their new hosts if the donor has this particular mix of bacteria. Most of us cultivate these populations of bacteria in our early years, but antibiotics can affect them (obviously antibiotics are super essential at times), as well as diet and medication.

In trying to get myself well, I took probiotics and got addicted to coconut yogurt in an attempt to support my mental health. I know from my intense lifestyle that involves lots of stress, touring and unpredictable meals that the least I can do is keep the healthy populations of bacteria alive and kicking the best I can. This study references the benefits of probiotics [6].

Parasites and Infections

It's well known that some infections are capable of producing changes in our mental health or contributing to mental illness, including Lyme disease, tapeworms, urinary tract infections, streptococcal infections and more.

What many people don't know is that parasites can also affect our behaviour. I picked up one of these bad boys after swimming in a lake, and it wasn't fun. There is a funny Vice interview with a Czech researcher about parasites [7]. It kicked off on the internet that cat parasites were to blame for everything bad in the world, but in reality, it is definitely not so simple. New research debunks it in fact [8]. However, research does show that parasites can significantly affect their hosts and humans aren't immune from this. So if you're feeling shit, maybe you have one adversely affecting you?

Allergies and Inflammation

This article in the Guardian basically writes how a growing number of scientists are suggesting that depression is a result of inflammation caused by the body's immune system [9]. Having just spent the last months of my life trying to address the inflamed cartilage in my rib cage, I can attest that the physical pain obviously made me feel shit – but the inflammatory process itself no doubt contributed to my psycho-emotional health and perhaps can explain why I've been feeling a million times better emotionally since addressing this chronic inflammation.

An article in the New York Times stated how severe allergies can bring sleeplessness, headaches, fatigue and a general feeling of physical depletion, all of which can worsen mood. Studies have found that allergic reactions release compounds in the body called cytokines, which play a role in inflammation and may reduce levels of the hormone serotonin, which helps maintain feelings of well-being. And it's well known that some common allergy medications, like corticosteroids, can cause anxiety and mood swings. They even go on to hypothesise that a rise in suicides in Spring could be attributed to potential allergy increases. I'm unsure about that but it is an incredibly interesting field.

Brain Injuries

It is also worth noting that there is a lot of material now suggesting that traumatic brain injuries can be linked to poor mental health in later life.

A paper in the American Journal of Psychiatry, the largest study yet to

investigate the link, finds that even a single head injury indeed increases the risk of later psycho-emotional illness, especially if the injury occurs during adolescence [10]. A study in Copenhagen looked at people that had been admitted to hospital with brain injuries over 23 years. Their risk increased by 65 percent for experiences called schizophrenia, and 59 percent for experiences called depression. Of course the ways that statistics are gathered and interpreted can be problematic, often one causality is analysed and conclusions are drawn that could be related to other common factors in those people's lives etc., still, it can be useful to consider a multiplicity of possible factors in our experiences and take them all into account. I'm praying that getting hit round the head with a golf club when I was 15 isn't going to play out like this! But it's worth thinking about how injuries might affect us. I've know hunt sabs who've experienced intense hunt violence (being punched, kicked in the head, hit with sticks etc.) almost change in personality after. They experienced varying psycho-emotional distress and behavioural changes for a number of months and years after.

Our Environment

And finally, it wouldn't be worth writing about the ecology of feeling shit without commenting on the actual environments we live in. There is endless research about how landscapes can affect our mental health and how much the built environment can contribute to well-being (or lack of it).

So there you have it – there may be a whole host of reasons why you feel shit. It's clear that everyone eating groovy fermented food while living in a white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist system isn't somehow gonna make life easier for people. But I do think that while we are trying to survive, resist and dismantle this shitty system, we need to aim for the strongest personal and collective health possible.

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DISEMBODIMENT, INTIMACY, AND CAPITALISM

Before getting ill, I had zero idea that my body might give up before my drive and will to organise. I didn't know much about the adrenal system, nutritional deficiencies, or how trauma affects the body. I was so dissociated from my body that I didn't even know that my body was about to give up. I couldn't feel the cues that I was exhausted and depleted, I didn't hear the signals that I needed rest or that there was a heaviness in my chest I could not shift. Recovering from burnout for me, therefore, has been about building an awareness of my own body as more than just a machine that get's stuff done. Pain has made me connect again, made me feel. Despite the brutality of it, I am grateful.

Dr. Peter A. Levine, author of In An Unspoken Voice: How the body releases trauma and restores goodness, writes how all our experiences (tracing back as early as growing in our mother's womb), all of the stresses, injuries, and trauma, as well as the feelings of safety, joy, grace and goodness that have affected our lives – all of these change the shape of our bodies" [1]. This kind of statement always felt a bit new agey to me, and I felt an initial rejection of this concept. However, after reading and researching a lot this year in the fields of neurobiology, trauma, and medicine, it's clear that our life experiences intimately affect our physiology. This blog aims to explore some of these patterns.

Formal trauma definitions introduce how traumatisation occurs when we are intensely frightened and either physically restrained or perceive we are trapped. We freeze in paralysis and/or collapse in overwhelming helplessness. However, this might explain individual incidents, like taking a beating from the police, or a parent, or being run down by a car. But it doesn't do justice to the complexity of chronic stress, trauma, and immobility where emotional symptoms surface such

as numbness, shutdown, entrapment, helplessness, depression, fear, terror, rage, and hopelessness. Dr. Levine writes how "the person remains fearful, unable to imagine safety from a never ending (internal) enemy and unable to reengage with life".

Trauma, Relationships, and Intimacy

As a fairly "high-functioning" person, (whatever that means… productive in capitalism?!), I hadn't believed that the above symptoms were present in my life, or that the books I was reading applied to me because of my capacity to get shit done. Surely I can't be that messed up if I'm able to hold down a job or kick-ass in a campaign? Bessel van Der Kolk (author of The Body Keeps the Score), however, argues that many patients are professionally successful, but their intimate relations are bleak and distant. He wrote how they had enormous trouble negotiating intimate relationships, often veering from indiscriminate, high-risk, and unsatisfying sexual involvements to total sexual shutdown [2]. After trauma, the world becomes sharply divided between those who know and those who don't. People who have not shared the traumatic experience cannot be trusted because they can't understand it.

Since getting out of jail, relationships have been a total minefield. With most partners, I feel like a total alien, like we are from different planets in terms of life experiences. I feel most at ease with those that have been inside themselves or somehow been in a position of prisoner support. I think a key driver of my anti-prison work is desperately seeking relationships with people that understand. Like a veteran that only feels alive when revisiting their traumatic past, somehow re-subjecting myself to the prison – via prison visits, talks, and events, or writing and reading about prisons – brings me a strange sense of comfort or familiarity.

Bessel van Der Kolk writes how achieving any sort of deep intimacy – a close embrace, sleeping with a mate, and sex – requires allowing oneself to experience immobilisation without fear.

> **INTIMACY AFTER PRISON IS A MESSY EXPERIENCE, AND IN REFLECTION, I KNOW THAT MY WORKAHOLISM SERVED ME AS A WAY OF BLOCKING IT AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE.**

To be still, gentle, or lie-in with someone felt torturous when all my body wanted to do was stop itself from feeling anything at all or make sense of the

internal whirlwind of unexpressed emotions in my body.

Workaholism and Extremism

Dr. Levine writes how overwork, sex and so forth, are all ways to suppress, numb, or control the body – or are, ironically, misdirected attempts to feel it. He writes how the degree to which we cannot deeply feel our body's interior is the degree to which we crave excessive external stimulation. We seek titillation, overexertion, drugs and sensory overload. While drug use was a big part of my late childhood, as I grew older, working myself to death became the only way I could feel (or continue to not feel). Subjecting myself to extreme situations, such as prisons or street conflicts with the police, or night time actions before I got sent down, were the only way I could feel alive. Everything else felt banal.

Friends joke with me that I always have something 'heavy' going on, like supporting suicidal friends, or coping with yet another bereavement, or setting myself an impossible schedule and throwing myself into another mammoth intimidating campaign. It was like I could only exist at this dark end of life's spectrum of experiences. Van Der Kolk writes how his patients often complain about a vague sense of emptiness and boredom when they are not angry, under duress, or involved in some dangerous activity. What would floor many people, was a totally normal daily experience for me. When things started to ease up, I always had a sense of dread that something awful was round the corner. I told an ex-partner that I had to feel joy when it came and not take it for granted, because it wouldn't be long till it was gone again. So my life has been these extremes of quite heavy messed up shit, and fleeting moments of joy and passion, but overall a feeling like I was doomed to this reality forever.

Disembodiment, Lack of Safety and Capitalism

I realise now my response to trauma has been disembodiment and the deadening of my feelings. I had lost the capacity to feel the subtleties in life. Now, I am trying to rebuild this relationship with my body, and it has felt like I am almost alive for the first time. One of the first exercises I did was in the shower, where you let the water run over a certain part of your body and really try to feel the sensations. Likewise, self-massage and body scans can start to cultivate a gentle mindfulness. I think herbalism was also a route to this awareness, anchoring me into subtle changes in the taste or texture of plants.

Dr. Levine writes how emotional regulation, our rudder through life, comes through embodiment. The awareness of body sensations is critical in changing

functional and emotional states. It's obvious that I was unable to implement a "sustainable lifestyle" because I had no rudder to do this. I could not get the feedback, I could not read or hear my body when everyone else around me was telling me to slow down. Overcoming burnout is basically impossible without cultivating body awareness. Van Der Kolk shares that we need to register and act on our physical sensations to keep our bodies safe. "The price for ignoring or distorting the body's messages is being unable to detect what is truly dangerous or harmful for you and, just as bad, what is safe or nourishing."

However, without a feeling of relative safety, described by Dr. Levine as "an atmosphere that conveys refuge, hope and possibility", we cannot hope to heal. This leaves me feeling despairing in our capitalist context, thinking of how many people are denied this existence. When you chronically feel unsafe, not just because of past trauma, but because of the state of the world, this feels really hard to find. Every man feels like a threat, that they will touch you without your consent or worse, every cop car a sign of danger, every emotional person seeming like a potential extractive drain of your emotional labour. For me, healing from this has been recognising that not everything is a threat, that there are people around me who care about me and with whom I feel safe. That returning to prison is not imminent, and that not everyone I fall in love with is going to eventually abandon me. But this stuff is written into our physiology, in ways I never comprehended, and so for me to cultivate a feeling a safety, I have had to reconnect with my body and give it reassurance that I am safe and most importantly, safe enough to feel.

Dr. Levine articulates that:

"Trauma sufferers, in their healing journeys, learn to dissolve their rigid defences. In this surrender they move from frozen fixity to gently thawing, and finally, free flow. In healing the divided self from its habitual mode of dissociation, they move from fragmentation to wholeness. In becoming embodied they return from their long exile. They come home to their bodies and know embodied life, as though for the first time. While trauma is hell on earth, its resolution may be a gift from the gods."

Coming back to my body, despite it being triggered by bone-crushing agony in my rib cage, has been radically transformational. It is only now that I can feel that I'm tired or sore that I am learning to set boundaries and limits in my

life that will protect me. Finally, I am able to have slow and sensual interactions with people, and I really believe now that my capacity to actually have a healthy relationship is so much more likely now that I can value the subtleties of my senses and gain a sense of safety.

Van Der Kolk writes how "traumatised human beings recover in the context of relationship: with families, loved ones, AA meetings, veteran's organisations, religious communities, or professional therapists. The role of those relationships is to provide physical and emotional safety, including safety from feeling shamed, admonished, or judged, and to bolster the courage to tolerate, face, and process the reality of what has happened." For those involved in social struggle, relationships are at the root of safety – and our responsibility is to try to cultivate this in our groups, collectives, and networks so that we can find healing and strength to fight back against this world that traumatises us all.

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FUCK YEAH FEMME

Overcoming burnout for me has been about accepting the parts of myself that I have been fighting, repressing, and rejecting. It's been about dismantling this idea of the indestructible Nicole Rose and recognising and owning my vulnerability.

> **IT IS ACCEPTING THAT I AM A TOTAL MASSIVE SOFTIE. AND FINALLY NOT SEEING THIS AS A WEAKNESS OR A SOURCE OF SHAME, BUT AS A STRENGTH.**

Having so much love and support from my femme [1] friends during my months of chronic illness has made me fall in love with these mega-babes and how they are in the world. Whether it is cute messages and memes, little gifts in the post, or their time and energy giving emotional energy to listen and express care for me.

Being brought up just by my Mum, I have always known the massive strength that femmes have. My Mum's clinical depression throughout my childhood, however (mostly due to my absent father, lack of support and financial stability), led me to believe that emotionality was a weakness. The constant tears felt like a loss of strength or an inability to cope. This meant for a long time I lived on shutdown. I didn't want to express my feelings, for fear of loading or leaning on others 'too much'. The macho culture around me, especially in the animal liberation movement, made me internalise this self-hatred or embarrassment for expressing fear, despair, sadness or sensitivity. I feared that expressing my true

emotions would lead to rejection and a loss of support. I knew the exhaustion of being in this caring dynamic, and so I tried as much as possible to exist in a self-contained way without reaching out to others.

This self-containment led to a process of self-minimisation, repeating patterns of almost disappearing myself in supporting others: the relentless process of putting others before myself and failing to claim space and support for me. This is the story that femmes will know everywhere. It is how we are socialised in this messed up society. This awareness meant that I also actively tried to reject these gendered roles. It made me feel like somehow by doing all this support work for others I was betraying my feminist politics or capitulating to the carer role by default without challenging the dynamics in my relationships and collectives. (Oh how we punish ourselves for enacting patriarchy, and then not dismantling it 'enough').

So all this stuff was generative of a complex, messy internal struggle of simultaneously wanting to express care while somehow rejecting the socially constructed nature of it. It felt restimulating of the subjugation of myself into this role as a kind of 'carer' to my Mum growing up.

I wanted to write this blog to untangle all this stuff. It was a hangout with my utterly fabulous friend Otter Lieffe (incredible transfeminist author, bodyworker, and organiser) when I finally started to see my femme nature as a source of pride. She shared with me how doing trauma support work in Palestine had helped her set boundaries in her caring labour. Through these boundaries came the structure she needed to do this work for the long-haul, and it gave her a vehicle to express her amazing femme-caring-magic nature. This femme-affirming friendship has strengthened me and allowed me to begin to unlearn the internalised distaste for my caring nature.

I started to see the power and visibility of these incredible healing femmes. I allowed myself to be cared for in a way that unfroze me and melted my hardness. This new world of love heart emojis, cute radical femme memes and expressions of love and care for the people around me felt *so* good. Finding my femmeness and reclaiming it changed the narrative of my life. I realised the prisoner support work I do is not a massive, heavy, thankless task, but a way to express my huge heart, love, and solidarity. I can own the fact that I do this work as caring labour, and this is a radical act.

Presenting as 'hard' has been an act of survival that has kept me safe and reinforced my boundaries. Of course, it will click into action when needed, but right now I am accepting my softness as a strength. I feel proud that I am

a daughter of an emotionally-expressive, deeply caring human being. This fear of "turning into my mother", that has psychologically haunted me since her nervous breakdown is finally transforming into a radical acceptance that emotionality is not a weakness. That expressing softness does not lead to a loss of power or strength and that I deserve as much love as I give to others and that my needs for love and support are not 'too much' but completely valid.

Developing a chronic illness reduced the energy I had to keep cementing my walls and repressing parts of myself. I know that people involved in liberation struggles deep down are all total utter softies with huge hearts and intense empathy for others. So let's drop the macho bullshit and let's express the love and care we feel for each other. And for my bad-ass femme friends and comrades, let yourselves open up to care and love from others and fuck feeling shame for being femme. I know that love and care and serious femme pride amongst my mates has been the secret ingredient to overcoming burnout. So be soft, express your feelings, love, and care for others and try your hardest to not let this cruel world harden you into not feeling or caring for others. Care is a radical act, and one of our biggest weapons.

Footnotes

1. I'm being deliberately vague in defining what femme means, because it's a term defined by folk personally/individually, with different and unique meanings for all of us. 'Feminine' which has been a complicated term in the context of patriarchy – where its aspects and attributes are often culturally (mis)associated with female bodies in an essentialist way, has also been additionally kinda turned grim in new agey contexts and massively appropriated by capitalism and consumerism. It's also spoken about in a binary way in 'contrast' to the culturally loaded definitions/understandings of what gets called 'masculine'. Femme feels more radical, complex, fluid and bad-ass. I definitely don't want people associating it with people's genitals!

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PUTTING THE MOVE INTO MOVEMENT

In one of my recent blogs, I wrote about disembodiment and how trauma had changed my relationship to not just my own body but the world around me. In this blog, I want to write about movement in a radical context.

Organising for social change can often be dominated by intellectual pursuit with its intense debates, written word and propaganda. Meanwhile our bodies, within capitalism, become subjects of consumerism, a unique market for all sorts of cosmetics and fitness programs, gyms, medical needs and more. Our deeply socialised Cartesian split between body and mind that is inherent in capitalism and whiteness fractures our relationships with ourselves and each other. And don't get me started on gender!

I feel like there are tons of things written about this so I want to focus on one: movement.

During the development of my costochondritis (the gnarly chronic inflammation in my rib cage), I got given a whole ton of different medical advice. The main narrative from conventional doctors and NHS consultants was to rest my body, take painkillers and don't lift anything too heavy or irritate the cartilage in my ribs. For sure I needed rest desperately, but the lack of movement in those months of bed-bound bone-crushing pain has had real repercussions. It feels like the last year I have been trying to undo all the harm of not moving.

In overcoming disassociation and disembodiment, and trying to rehabilitate my body itself, I have been actively reflecting on the role of movement in our movements.

I just want to start this blog with a heartfelt call-out to all my chronically sick mates who for whatever reason can't exercise or train or use their bodies

like they used to, or maybe have never been able to use their bodies in the ways above. You are still whole and perfect and I adore you!

Somatics

One of the most beautiful examples of integrating movement and body awareness with broader systemic transformation is the crew from Generative Somatics. I'm never going to do them justice in a paragraph, so please check out their resources to learn more [1]. They describe generative somatics as "a transformative change theory and praxis using Somatic Awareness, Somatic Opening and Somatic Practices inside of a social analysis to forward individual, community and systemic transformation. Generative somatics has integrated an overt political analysis, and a trauma and healing lens to continue to evolve the work and its reach."

Somatic Awareness involves learning to listen to and live inside of our sensations and aliveness (feelings, movement, body, etc.). But it's so much more than this.

Yoga

If there is one thing that has helped me recover, it is yoga (most explicitly yoga asanas – the physical movements). Yet the power relationships around yoga are complex and screwed up, and as I've been learning some of the asanas, I've also been trying to learn its history and current dynamics. It's clear that yoga has become a commodity. We are sold that yoga means whiteness, thinness, and a higher economic status. Spiritual practices going back thousands of years are being repackaged in our capitalist system. Many practitioners don't even attempt to self-educate about the dynamics between spirituality, race, class, caste and colonialism. We are often just sold yoga as being a bunch of stretches.

Maisha Z. Johnson and nisha ahuja write about the violent history of how yoga has been exploited for the West:

"The British used violence, rape, and murder to take control of the South Asian sub-continent – and they approached yoga with violence, too. They forced people to convert to Christianity, and outlawed the healing and spiritual practices seen as "primitive" traditions, like yoga." [2]

There are very few critical conversations around cultural appropriation or issues highlighted that include a disregard for sacred objects, mispronouncing languages and not having the faintest clue of any historical yogis. Not to mention

racism and exotification of other cultures.

Likewise, folks are flagging up the inaccessibility of this commercial yoga – including working-class communities, people of colour, folks with disabilities or chronic health issues, trans and non-binary folks, and those that are larger than the thin, Western stereotype. All may feel, and be actively excluded from, yoga asana classes and wider communities because of very real structural barriers.

For me, being an anarchist means committing to vigilance – constantly reflecting and trying to observe power relations and my role in them, as well as structural forces such as racism, classism, sexism and so forth. Yoga should be no different. Especially for those of us from the England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland who barely ever talk about our brutal colonial past and neocolonial present.

Susanna Barkataki writes how:

"Yoga is not now, nor has it ever been, a practice aimed at physical mastery for its own sake. Nor is it a practice aimed at "stress-reduction" so we can function as better producers and consumers in a capitalist society…

By remaining unaware of the history, roots, complexity and challenges of the heritage from which yoga springs and the challenges it has faced under Western culture, they perpetuate a re-colonisation of it by stripping its essence away." **[3]**

Many practitioners are also highlighting the imagery in common yoga magazines, sharing that mainstream yoga publications and media reproduce hetero(sexualised) images of women that reduce them to sexual objects. Kerri Kauer writes how "The exclusion of queer or trans bodies sends a subtle but powerful message: you do not fit into or are invited or welcome into this culture. And, it sends a message to consumers that yoga is a viable "workout" to obtain the idealised body, which often perpetuates self-objectification and internalised oppression." [4]

Most South-Asian writers talking about decolonising yoga, do not say don't practice, but they do ask for respect, for an honouring of context, a commitment to learning about all of the above issues and putting that learning into practice in terms of how yoga is spoken about or how yoga classes are organised etc.

Fighting and Self-Defence

Another aspect of movement in our movements that has always had a presence is fighting and self-defence. This couldn't be more relevant right now with the re-empowerment of the far right. For many folks, mainstream gyms can feel intimidating, have a macho and competitive atmosphere and also only allow able-bodied folk to participate.

Anarchists, anti-fascists, and others have also taken responsibility for self-organising training. In Bristol, there is a weekly informal session where folks do pad work, scenario-based training, and some fitness exercises. It is a non-macho, supportive atmosphere. Likewise in London, there is the Solstar Sports Association in North London and Queer Muay Thai in South London. These options are both donation-based which is important for making them more open to folks. Many are also in squatted spaces or social centres, serving another function of radically reclaiming spaces for struggle.

Writing on Freedom News, a participant in an anti-fascist training weekend said: "Our gyms and training must not be radical only in name, but also in approach — we must look after each other and create supportive, inclusive, self-aware environments." [5]

If you've been to mainstream MMA gyms or kickboxing clubs, you can really feel the difference between these spaces. It can be very useful, however, to have folks that have interacted with different gyms and fighting styles just so that knowledge can then be shared. I hope in coming years that more and more of these spaces open up.

We have to defend ourselves and our communities from racist and fascist attacks, anti-semitic, transphobic, misogynist and patriarchal violence. It's not just in the streets but can be in our homes and relationships. Of course it's also not just physical but emotional and psychological abuse that so many of us experience.

I wholeheartedly agree with critiques of martial arts in relationship to allegedly stopping intimate partner violence. Learning self-defence alone is never going to prevent intimate violence or end rape culture, but it is one part of the parcel. In a podcast about the Haymaker Gym in Chicago, the interviewee shares how they know that training alone cannot end intimate partner violence, but it can build confidence and relationships, and I think this is a really important point [6].

When I was training, I didn't realise the repercussions it would have for my confidence in defending myself and my boundaries in multiple respects. It was

in prison that I became a gym bunny, and I really believe that exercising and lifting weights in there was not just about strengthening my body but developing my psychological strength to cope with life in jail.

"Physical training is a crucial and often neglected component of anarchist practice. We believe that fostering material resistance starts with the most intimate of material forces – our bodies. We grow our potential as we learn what our bodies are capable of doing together. Revolutionary movements around the world have made use of the solidarity and strength that physical training fosters, but there are few, if any, political gyms across the so-called United States."

– Haymaker Gym in Chicago

Sports

I feel like sports get a bad rap in anarchist scenes. On one camp, you get those saying football, for example, is "opiates for the masses" (which I think is offensive in multiple ways) or that sport fosters competition which is essential for capitalism/patriarchy etc. In other camps, you see how sports are part of people's identities and ultimately how they move their bodies and stay fit. As capitalism does its best to force us all into offices and workplaces, I think we have to critically embrace sport and movement as much as we can.

A good article in the Occupied Times explores the politics of sport in more depth:

"As sport becomes more and more commercialised, increasingly expensive, consistently reinforcing gender norms, and unashamedly involved in the destruction of working-class homes and neighbourhoods (as World Cup, Olympics and Commonwealth Games 'preparations' have shown), people are organising their own radical and liberatory sports practices." [7]

Anti-fascist football teams have been a long tradition, like the Clapton Ultras. There are also groups like the Earth First! Climbers Guild, who meet up to share skills and build relationships that can be used in ecological defence campaigns. Many people also have running collectives and groups. My favourite sport-related fundraiser is Running Down the Walls in the US that is an annual race fundraising for New York Anarchist Black Cross.

Sports are also useful for generally supporting an atmosphere of sobriety and more awareness of nutrition, which I feel are incredibly important for staying

fit for struggle.

Dance

Finally, we cannot forget the revolutionary role of dance. I'm never in a million years going to do it justice in a small blog so wanted to say hell yeah dance has been an integral heartbeat to revolutionary movements, for like, forever!

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FINAL WORDS

I am stoked to say this is my last blog in the Overcoming Burnout series. I never expected my writing to grow into this project or be read by as many people as it has. The feedback and support I've had from all over the world has completely blown my mind. Thank you a million times over.

So to close, I want to write my final reflections and feelings about this stuff before wrapping it up.

> **I'VE LEARNT THAT FOR ME, OVERCOMING BURNOUT HAS BEEN, AND ULTIMATELY WAS, POSSIBLE. BUT MY MAIN LEARNING IS THAT RECOVERY OF ANY KIND IS IMPOSSIBLE WITHOUT SOME KIND OF COLLECTIVE SUPPORT.**

We might believe through our social conditioning that it's us against the world, or that we achieve a lot through our own efforts, self-discipline and so forth. Yet perspectives like this can make us blind to structural power and privilege and reinforce the individualistic tendencies of our culture. They can invisibilise the caring and emotional labour involved in supporting each other from drowning.

In my first blog, I wrote how I was lifeless and in pain. I was in and out of the hospital. I was sleeping 16 hours a day. My system was on total shutdown. Right now I'm still grappling with my pesky ribs but overall I'm feeling stronger and more resilient and am actively organising, socialising and working again, albeit at a more steady pace and with a lot of interventions to not go under.

Yet I know that tons of my friends with chronic illnesses can't follow this trajectory because of the kinds of illnesses or disabilities they have or for many

other reasons. For many, they are struggling physically and/or psycho-emotionally because of structural barriers blocking their access to care and support. I also want to emphasise that I am definitely not saying that able-bodiedness is some kind of goal, I'm just trying to highlight the structural barriers to support.

So I want to acknowledge this with radical honesty – the sheer privilege of the support I've been able to leverage has been what's really helped me overcome burnout: my access to land and safe, secure housing. My huge network of friends and contacts in the anarchist movement and other circles like permaculture. My existing knowledge of herbalism and my access to an amazing network of radical herbalists. Financial support from my grandad, in the beginning, to access specialists beyond the NHS who treated me with acupuncture and bodywork. My co-workers in my workers co-operative that held the fort the best they could when I crashed and burned. My incredible amazing comrades who sucked up my workload, helped transform our collectives into more sustainable models, and emotionally supported me to process my shit while physically trying to enable my continued participation in our struggles, like ensuring warm places to stay or carrying my bags. Free weekly counselling sessions from a caring comrade were life changing. My wonderful mum and sister who felt so present and consistent. Yes, I put a lot of effort into processing my shit, into researching treatments and changing my lifestyle, but ultimately it was a whole ecosystem of support that kept me going.

And it's with a heavy heart that I know this is not the reality for 99% of people. Atomisation, alienation and loneliness plague capitalist existence. Many can only access state healthcare that may be damn amazing in emergency rooms, but when it comes to complex chronic illnesses, just isn't set up for that level of support. Many people are estranged from their families. Unending numbers of people have precarious housing and income. Tons of people genuinely don't have many friends or the relationships they have feel eternally dissatisfying in terms of support or affection. Thousands are imprisoned and we know inside health care is labelled "health scare" because the levels of neglect are appalling. People without papers are unable to access most services. Many don't have English as a first language. My trans friends are more likely to have their trauma triggered when visiting a doctor or even an alternative health practitioner. The list is endless.

For me, responding to burnout as a political issue is less about "self-care" or lifestyle choices, and more about building mutual aid and collective models of care. Overcoming burnout has to a collective effort, and healthcare has to be a

centre of our struggles.

> **THIS IS WHY TO ADDRESS BURNOUT WE MUST ADDRESS STRUCTURAL OPPRESSION, POWER AND PRIVILEGE. WE MUST EXPLORE THIS SHIT WITH CRITICAL LENSES THAT INTERROGATE RACE, CLASS, GENDER ETC.**

Sometimes organising is hard graft. It's impacted my relationships, livelihood, health and I guess took away my freedom on multiple levels. Yet now I'm a lot better and I can look back on the last months I can see that holy fuck am I glad to be part of these communities and networks.

Though sadly this experience is not universal. I know many mates have had the opposite feeling or experience in relation to anarchist or other social movements. Many have felt abandoned; that now they are not "active" it's like they have disappeared to people.

So I wriggle around with more self-doubt. Is my access to support larger in comparison because I've been so public about it? Is it because I'm a visible organiser? Is it because I'm an extrovert that can confidently ask for support and articulate my feelings? Why have so many people burnt out and completely dropped out because of lack of support when others manage to access it?

I'll never know the answers to these questions because I can only safely speak for myself, and I can only try to listen to the people around me or those comfortable to share their voices. But I feel they are important questions to raise and I think we need to start talking more about "social capital" in terms of accessing support and resources.

It's taken a long time to cultivate this support web around me. Back as a teenager, after my house was raided by the police only one friend called me to see if I was okay. I had no financial safety net. My partner and I at the time were on benefits. We lived off vegan sausage rolls from Asda. Sure I knew lots of people in the animal liberation movement, but solidarity wasn't valued and those six years of acute state repression were all out war on my relationships.

Just before going to prison, after working 70-80hr weeks in care work to clear my debt, I got my first half tattoo sleeve done. My tattoo reads "never alone". I got it to remind me how non-humans and the land are always on our side in resistance and with feeling this came strength. Yet unpacking it more I can see that loneliness or abandonment were perhaps my biggest fears. The deaths of close friends and family leading up to my burnout only compounded these fears.

This vulnerability pushed me to invest in relationships, and burnout meant that more than ever I needed to learn to trust other people and let them in and let them care for me.

There are so many things I haven't been able to write about that I have wanted to – the role of ACES (adverse childhood experiences), a larger blog about herbalism and burnout, a piece on anarchist healthcare and existing mutual aid networks and the list goes on. Overcoming burnout, for me, has been about accepting my limits. I can't write all this stuff even if I wanted to, and that is really, really, okay. Overcoming burnout has been about choosing a focus and accepting my capacities, and figuring out the biggest gifts I can bring to social struggles. Overcoming burnout has been about what relationship models actually work for me and are not the prescribed societal way of loving other people. Overcoming burnout has been about grieving my dead friends. Overcoming burnout has been about reclaiming my witchiness and spirituality. Overcoming burnout has been about unlearning habits and patterns of a lifetime and trying desperately amidst a fucked up world to try and set some boundaries for myself and keep my body rested and nourished so that I can survive, fight back and feel joy.

So that's all folks! Thank you for reading. Thank you for your support and solidarity on this journey.

Until all are free,
Nicole

EPILOGUE

As I wrote the last blog in November 2017, I was so excited to begin designing the book and get it out there in the world. However, life had other plans. Instead I was battered by bereavements, six in total, one a month for six months. The day after my ex-partners memorial service, I got a call from the prison saying one of my best friends was in hospital and might not make it. They had attempted to take their own life and all I could do was sit by their bedside and pray that they woke up from the coma. They finally did, but so began an intense run of further suicide attempts, and it felt like every 10 days I was getting calls from the prison or the hospital saying it had happened again. They are still alive and have now been moved to a secure hospital. The heartbreak and stress sent my health backwards and triggered a bad episode culminating in a nervous breakdown and time off work and organising, as I somehow had to piece myself back together again. I sought professional help and was diagnosed with complex PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder).

I somehow believed my physical health challenges with my rib pain were the manifestation of everything I had endured and that somehow, by physically recovering and writing these blogs I had done the deep work needed to process it all. Yet the PTSD brought it all back, flashbacks of prison, outbursts of rage, hypervigilance in my body. For the first time in 15 years, I had to take a temporary step back from prison visits and anti-prison organising. Even the mention of the word 'prison' would make me want to throw up.

During this period I wrote the piece *Trauma Recovery and Abolition: State violence, PTSD and Healing Justice* on the Solidarity Apothecary website. It begins a new phase of writing more about PTSD itself and my experiences with tools such as

trauma releasing exercises and eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR). I hope it will be useful to people recovering from state violence and other forms of trauma.

I learnt this last year that overcoming burnout is not a one-time thing. It is not an event that happens which you forget about. It is an absolute constant effort - to keep trying to set healthier boundaries and not take on too much, to keep asking for support when you need it, to keep trying to listen to your body and hardest of all, to not just default to certain patterns because they are familiar.

Likewise, chronic illness feels like a shadow even if you 'recover'. There is always a fear if you eat the wrong food, or catch a certain infection, that you will tumble backwards. Recovery feels like a game of Snakes and Ladders. Healing is definitely not linear. It's less a phoenix out of the ashes, and more a tired achey bird slowly taking a peak outside.

All of my experiences with chronic illness have led me to now train as a clinical herbalist so that I can support movements for liberation with plant medicines, especially in the context of recovery from state violence.

If there is one thing that I have learned from prison abolition organising is that all this stuff - collective care, disability and health justice, trauma recovery - this *is the work*. It has always been the work, but just like feminine labour, it has been invisible and unrecognised for too long. It has always existed (and has mostly been built up by disabled folks and women of colour) but has often been marginalised in movements The same way that we invisiblise our own bodies and all the work they do for us without us even noticing. I hope this book can inspire people to take this political work seriously, to take care of each other in beautiful and loving ways because our bodies are what we have to change this world.

RESOURCES

A number of resources are listed in the references sections of each chapter.

With such a fast-changing world and new resources coming out on what feels like a daily basis, I decided instead of creating a resource section that would soon be out of date that I would create a repository online.

Please find a collection of links and burnout resources here:

http://www.solidarityapothecary.org/resources

TRANSLATIONS

A number of individuals and collectives have been translating individual posts online from the Overcoming Burnout series into French, Russian and Polish. Warsaw Anarchist Black Cross is also releasing a printed version.

If you would like to translate the book or any of its content, please go ahead. To collaborate please contact info@solidarityapothecary.org

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are so many friends that I would love to name and thank. However, because most of them are still bad-ass revolutionaries, we decided together to not list names in here. You know who you are.

A big thank you to folks at Active Distribution to enable the printing of this book, as well as a massive thank you for the editing and proofreading labour.

To my best friends still behind bars - Sam, Taylor, Kevan and Sven, and everyone else I know in the prison system, you have survived more trauma and abuse than I can even imagine and your strength blows my mind every single day. One day we will sit by the ocean together.

To all the people who did not make it out of prison alive, including Charlie and Karen, you are not forgotten. To my recent ancestors who passed away in the last few years, losing you has taught me so much about life and I miss you every day: Grandad, Nanny, Edna, Barbara, Mahes, Shauna, Greta and John, and to my best friends Gilly, Jo and Anna, my grief for you birthed this book.

Unending gratitude to my Mum, Sister, Uncle and Step Dad.

And to my revolutionary lover, you inspire so much strength in me and are teaching me what it means to love.

To all the plant medicines that healed my body and nourished me back to health, I cannot thank you enough.

Finally, to all of you out there that are putting your bodies on the line and trying to fight back, resist, organise, in whatever ways your bodies are able - we are not alone and we've got this.

ABOUT NICOLE ROSE

Nicole Rose is an anarchist organiser, grassroots herbalist and agroecologist living in England that has been active in struggles for human, animal and earth liberation for over 20 years. Nicole did a 3.5-year prison sentence aged 21 amidst a decade of state repression against the campaign to close down Europe's largest animal testing company. She's been supporting loved ones in prison for over 15 years, and recently founded the Solidarity Apothecary, a project supplying free plant medicines to people experiencing and recovering from state violence and repression. Nicole is also the author of *The Prisoner's Herbal*.

All proceeds of this book will go to prisoner support or towards the Solidarity Apothecary.

ABOUT THE SOLIDARITY APOTHECARY

The Solidarity Apothecary is a grassroots herbalism project with a mission to materially support revolutionary struggles and communities with plant medicines to strengthen collective autonomy, self-defence and resilience to climate change, capitalism and state violence.

The Solidarity Apothecary has been making and distributing plant medicines to those on the frontline of state violence. This includes people being arrested, on trial, imprisoned, detained or recovering from these experiences. Plant medicines are distributed via the Anarchist Black Cross, an informal network of prisoner-support and anti-repression groups. Medicines are also offered to the people doing the support and solidarity work during these times.

The project also aims to supporting frontline organisers with herbal education and tools to overcome burnout and sustain their work.

www.solidarityapothecary.org

OVERCOMING BURNOUT

Organising with others for human, animal and earth liberation can be one of the most empowering experiences alive. Yet frontline resistance comes with risks to our physical and emotional health that can lead many people to burn out and abandon social movements altogether. This book is about overcoming burnout, linking the author's journey of recovery with wider systemic forces such as classism, sexism and power dynamics in groups, poverty, chronic illness and ableism, as well as grief and trauma from prison and state repression. It is a call for models of mutual aid and collective care. Simultaneously deeply personal and acutely political, for anyone involved in grassroots organising, it is a must read.

"For communities resisting oppression, burnout is ever-present. Nicole's incredibly important writing calls on us to create a cultural shift, to do the work needed to understand burnout better and to show up for those in our communities most affected by oppression."

- Otter Lieffe, author and
founder of Trans Feminism International

£5 BENEFIT FOR PRISONER SUPPORT